

Acts 12: Serving a Lost World

I. Intro:

The letter from the Jerusalem Council was presented to the church in Antioch in Acts 15. As the chapter ends, Paul and Barnabas decide to go separate ways after a dispute about whether to take John Mark again. Paul saw him as a quitter, but Barnabas “The Son of Encouragement” saw potential in him. And near the end of his life, while imprisoned in Rome, Paul would call for John Mark to come because he saw him as helpful. Even Apostles need to change their minds about people and things sometimes!

Acts 16 begins the story of Paul’s Second Missionary Journey to a lost world. Paul leaves Antioch in Syria with Silas, and travels overland back through his hometown of Tarsus in Cilicia to visit the churches that had been planted on his first missionary journey in Galatia. During this initial part of the trip, Paul comes to Lystra and he decides to add Timothy to his team. Having just rejected one young man - John Mark from his team; we might ask, “Why did Paul see Timothy as a significant addition to this ministry team?” **Let’s Read Acts 16:1-5**

II. Timothy: A Man for the Hour: Acts 16:1-5

A. A Man of the World:

One reason I think that Paul saw Timothy as a valuable addition to the team is that he was a man for the hour. At the very time at which the major issue in the church is the relationship of Jew and Gentile and how “Jewish” a Christian must be; God directs Paul to a young man who is the perfect man for the time. Timothy’s mother was a Jewish believer and his father was a Greek and probably not a believer. Again, “Greek” is a general term for a Gentile. Timothy grew up with an understanding of both cultures. In a healthy sense, he was “a man of the world.” He could relate to people on both ends of the Jew/Gentiles spectrum and the believer/non-believer spectrum. This may not have been unique, but it was special.

B. Bridges Natural and Not:

Each of us is equipped to connect with certain people too. Now, you may find this hard to believe, but there was a time in my life when I was the “cool youth speaker”. Not anymore! I can’t keep up with the music, the TV shows, the social media phenomenon, or the pop stars. I don’t recognize a single celebrity houseguest on *Celebrity Big Brother*! I care about kids, but at this stage of life, it is much harder to find natural common ground or build bridges to their world. I tell stories about things they’ve never heard of like carrying change for the “Pay Phone”, or going to “Blockbuster” to rent a movie. No, I’m afraid “young and

cool” has passed me by! But each of us, because of ethnic background, or personal experiences, or stage of life, or employment, or interests and hobbies has natural common ground with people who need love, encouragement, and Jesus. Sometimes common ground is built right in. But sometimes you have to choose to build bridges with people! I think we do that by being interested in what interests them.

Example: Annika Giesbrecht “*Slacked*” the rest of us on staff with this picture from *Brookwood Baptist Church*. She called it “the best Easter Church Sign she’s seen.” (See picture)

C. An Even Better Bridge:

Timothy was a man for the hour because he had natural bridges to the people of his world. But notice the paradox in what Paul does next in order to minister in their controversial context. Paul circumcises Timothy so as not to be a stumbling block to Jews seekers. He makes Timothy an even better bridge! Circumcision was the very thing Paul argued strongly against requiring of believers. And he was travelling to all the churches that had been planted among the Gentiles, bringing the message from the Council in Jerusalem that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised in order to be saved. But he circumcises Timothy out of love and a desire to remove artificial barriers to the Jews. It wasn’t a theological issue. It was a sociological issue.

Application: A constant tension we face is to understand the cultures in which we live without being molded into its likeness. How do you engage the people of our world and our time in a way that they see the reality of Jesus Christ? How do we do so without becoming just like the world? Our methods have to be able to change, but our message does not. Engaging the culture requires some understanding of it. This means getting to know people.

Chris Wiersma, a pastor from Edmonton says;

- *“Stop thinking you can know everything you need to know about people far from God without actually knowing any people far from God.”* That’s good advice.
- *“Do you only listen to people you agree with? Listening is the hardest part. Most of what you need to know could be answered by people far from God.”*
- *“We need to be students of people’s lostness. (Here’s a dated phrase.) I’ve become the Barbara Walters of people far from God.”*
- *Ask yourself and ask them: Who are these people? What is your life like? What is your system of hope?”*

- *“There are differences in cultural nuance that are escaping us.”* A perfect example of this was Brian speaking about changes in our youth program at our AGM. Effective youth ministry today is going to involve loving kids with an LGBTQ orientation. A cultural nuance here is that dividing into separate guys and girls groups in that setting becomes awkward. I never thought of that.
- And last week John Johnstone was trying to helping see some things through indigenous people’s eyes; to understand cultural differences that we miss. Caring enough to understand people even when you may not agree with their views is a first step in building bridges.
- Wiersma continues . . . *Christians have often refused to negotiate with anything that could not be converted into an overt opportunity for our message or our goals. We often see this as taking a stand. But people far from God see this as immaturity. (Take our marbles and go home!)*

Bridge building takes love for people, and wisdom, and courage. I see a hint of this in a description of the people of Issachar in the book of *Chronicles*.

Men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do; I Chron. 12:32

There is a description of David in Psalm 78 which my wife Carol often prays for me and for whoever God brings to lead this congregation in the future.

*He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens;
from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob.
And David shepherded them with integrity of heart;
with skillful hands he led them. Psalm 78:70-72*

III. Timothy: A Man of the Word

A. Snakes and Doves:

A balance to our need to understand and connect with people far from God is our need to understand and connect with God and His Word. We must not be naïve about this. There is always pressure to be molded by the values and beliefs of people around us. Jesus said:

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Matthew 10:16

And Paul’s letter to the Christians at Rome reminds us:

“Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds . . .” Romans 12:1-2

For me, this renewal is through reflecting on God's Word and through Worship. Jesus prayed for us who would believe in Him while in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before His death saying;

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. John 17:14-18

B. Timothy and the Word:

I believe this is another reason Paul saw Timothy as a valuable addition to the team. He was a man of the Word. In a letter to Timothy near the end of his life, Paul encouraged this aspect of his life.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” 2 Timothy 3:14-15

Timothy had a strong foundation in the Word. It is a significant comment on his mother's parenting that Paul says, “*from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures*”. The Word of God was a regular part of their family life. And it seems to have gone beyond mere head-knowledge. They talked about the Scriptures and what they meant and how it applied to their lives. I think our busy high-tech world makes this harder than ever to do. But it helps to start early and to establish some pattern of reading and talking about God's word with our children.

However, even with that foundation Paul still exhorts him.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. 2 Timothy 2:15

Application: This is a lifelong challenge. At whatever stage we are at in life we must keep pressing on in God's Word, asking the Holy Spirit to teach us new things and take us deeper. What kind of worker should be ashamed of their work? Isn't it the person who does shoddy work? We could call it “Duct Tape Spirituality”.

- Slap a few spiritual words over gaping holes in our understanding and practice of the faith.
- Ignore the disconnect between what we say and what we do.

- Look for the easy way out or the temporary fix rather than making it right.

Are you doing your best *to present yourself to God as one who does not need to be ashamed*? Timothy was prepared to minister to a lost world because he was a man of the world and a man of the Word.

III. Paul: Led by the Spirit: READ - 16:6-10

A. Sensitive to the Spirit:

These verses shine light on an interesting period in the ministry of the Apostle Paul because of the way the Holy Spirit directed them. When Paul & Barnabus went on their 1st missionary journey, they appeared to mostly use the wisdom that God gave them in selecting where to go. They started by going to a place that Barnabus was familiar with, Cyprus. They went from there to Phrygia and Galatia central Turkey.

Now Paul has returned to encourage the churches; but also to go on from there to preach the gospel in other places. The next logical location was to simply keep heading west into the Roman Province of Asia which covered the southwestern part of modern Turkey and included major cities like Ephesus. This is exactly where Paul will go at the beginning of his Third Missionary Journey. But at this point Luke says:

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. Acts 16:6

Why would the Holy Spirit keep them from preaching in the Province of Asia? Was the time not right? Was the need in Greece greater? Was the groundbreaking work of Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus needed to prepare the soil? The answer is: *“Yes, Maybe, I don’t know!”* The reason is not given. But human logic is not enough to figure out what God is up to. This did not paralyze Paul and his companions as they sought to do what God called them to do. They carried on in preaching Christ in Phrygia and Galatia. I think that is a good balance for us.

We want to be led by the Holy Spirit. But we do not necessarily have to wait until the Spirit specifically directs us to something. They were called to proclaim Christ and they were faithful in doing so. They prayed for God’s direction and empowerment as they worked. But they also trusted that God was working through them even when they did not have specific direction from Him on what to do or where to go next. And they trusted that if God had something specific that they should do or not do; He was able to show them.

As Paul, Silas and Timothy moved northwest across Galatia they came to the districts called

Mysia and Bithynia. Mysia is the Northwest corner of Turkey and includes modern Istanbul. Bithynia is North Central Turkey and includes the ports on the Black Sea. Once again Luke tells us:

When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. Acts 16:7

Question: How do you think the Spirit of Jesus communicated that they were not allowed into Asia or Bithynia? Was it a strong impression, a lack of peace, a dream in the night, a still small voice? We aren't told. But what is clear is that they were seeking the direction of the Holy Spirit.

B. Obedient to the Spirit:

So they passed through Mysia to the coastal city of Troas. This suggests that they did not stop to evangelize as they traveled across Mysia. They were seeking the direction of the Holy Spirit because he seemed to be leading them by limiting their movement. Once they got to Troas, Paul had a vision.

During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 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." Acts 16:9-10

At this point, God's direction is not through limiting their movement but positive direction, and the direction is to Macedonia, Greece, and to Europe. Richard Longnecker in his commentary on Acts writes:

Authentic turning points in history are few. But surely among them, this the Macedonian vision ranks high. Because of Paul's obedience at this point, the gospel went westward; and ultimately Europe and the Western world were evangelized. A Christian's response to the call of God is never a trivial thing. Indeed as in this instance, great issues and untold blessings may depend on it. (The Expositors Bible Commentary, vol.9, pp. 458.)

Personal Application:

1. Unseen Impacts of Obedience and Disobedience: Is God speaking to you about something? Whatever it is, none of us can tell in advance what issues big or small are at stake or the blessing that God may have in response to your faith and obedience.
 - Perhaps God is speaking to you about greater holiness of life?
 - About stepping forward to seek to use your spiritual gifts.

- About forgiving someone who has hurt you?
- About being Good News to someone across the street?
- About setting aside a day a week to fast and pray?

Whatever it is, we can never tell what the impact on eternity that obedience will have. The man who came to my high school to run a Campus Life Club did not know that day when he met me for a coke at an Ice Cream Shop; that it would result in people coming to Christ in Canada, the U.S., India, Pakistan, or Holland. He did not know that God would use that afternoon to set free a 16 year old boy to preach and teach good news to people for more than 50 years. Or that some of those that God touched through him would become witnesses to the lost and shepherds of God's people in other places.

God has a plan and He is bringing it to pass. In the generation of Israel that came out of Egypt we see people who experienced great miracles and the power of God, but who missed out on the greater blessing God wanted to do through them because of their unbelief and disobedience.

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion." Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. Hebrews 3:15-19

2. The leading of the Holy Spirit can be mysterious. Neon signs and angelic choirs are not normally involved. A good example of the dilemma this can create is a pastoral search. Some decisions in life seem extra important for us to "GET RIGHT". But, that sometimes the will of God is a broad river and sometimes it is a narrow stream. Sometimes God lets us choose from a number of acceptable options and sometimes God has one specific path for us. A.W. Tozer used to say; *"God delights to lead His sheep but He doesn't necessarily tell them which blade of grass to nibble on!"*

The Pastoral Search Team has prayed much, checked references, and asked good questions. But so far, there has not been a "Man of Macedonia" moment. And that directing dream was not the norm for Paul either. He did not have a vision of a man from Corinth saying come help us, or a vision of a man from Athens after that. God directly intervened here, it seems to get Paul and the gospel to Europe. So if God has only one person to be the lead pastor here, He is able to show us. A different example of God's direction is in the previous chapter. The Apostles and Elders in their letter to the churches

in Acts 15:28 explained their decision saying “*It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us*”. They had reflected well on the issue and they felt peace from the Holy Spirit in it. The way God chooses to lead us is a mystery.

IV. Conclusion:

Timothy and Paul’s lives are helpful in being prepared for ministry to a lost world and to make our lives count for eternity. Timothy was a man for the hour because: he was A Man of the World – He understood the culture in which he served. He spoke their language. He knew the cultural nuances and the faux pas. Both his upbringing and his choices enabled him to build bridges with people around him. And he was Man of the Word. – He did not take for granted his foundation in the Word of God. He took seriously the challenge of being a workman who could wisely handle and teach what God says. And he was mentored in ministry by Paul who demonstrated the necessity to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and obedient to the Spirit’s direction.

Reflection Question:

1. How well do you know the people who live and work around you? Especially those who are far from God? (*their needs, their hopes, their fears, their language, their world*)
2. Why do many Christians tend to insulate themselves from people who don’t follow Jesus? What would have to change for you to open those doors in your life a little wider?
3. Other than church attendance and avoiding obvious sins, how different is your agenda in life than the people around you?
4. Are there choices in your life that are more influenced by the values of the culture than by the Word? How do you balance engaging the culture with renewing your mind in Christ?
5. What are some ways you actively seek to listen to the Holy Spirit?