

Acts Series Part 43

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Date: 03 October 2010

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[0 : 00] Is it possible, and if so, how to go about it? It's usually helpful to examine case studies or real-life experiences and to draw lessons from that.

And in this matter, we can also do something similar. Where to start if we are looking for real-life examples or case studies?

Of church planting in Europe. No doubt there would be many that we could consider and draw lessons from. But I reckon the first ever church plant on European soil is as good a place as any, certainly to make a start.

And I refer to Philippi in Macedonia. The passage that we've read speaks of how Paul and his companions were directed by God to Europe.

Now, they themselves weren't conscious of that designation that we give and that border that subsequent to these times was established between Asia and Europe.

[1 : 16] But nonetheless, for those of us who live today, we can legitimately consider this church plant in Philippi as the first European church plant.

Well, was it successful, this church plant in Philippi? Well, we can listen to the church planter himself, to Paul, as he writes to that selfsame church in Philippi in the letter, not surprisingly, to the Philippians and chapter 1.

And let's just read what he says. And what we read will speak for itself in answer to the question, was it successful, this church plant in Macedonia, in the province of Macedonia, in the city of Philippi?

We read there from verse 3, I thank my God every time I remember you in all my prayers for all of you. I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart. For whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me.

[2 : 37] God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

Well, it speaks for itself. These are words that were written 15 years after that church was first planted or established. And clearly, the evidence is of a church that was firmly grounded and was itself fruitful in reaching out to others.

So how was this church in Philippi planted? And what lessons can we learn? Now this evening, what I want to consider are the steps that led Paul and Silas to Philippi.

Steps that all occur before they step foot on European soil. This evening we won't actually accompany them to Philippi itself.

We will be considering all the prior steps to them actually arriving in Macedonia. And the passage that speaks to us of these prior steps is the passage that we've read in Acts chapter 15 and on through into chapter 16.

[4 : 10] It's the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey. And as we follow Paul's steps and Paul and his companions, as he begins that journey, I want to identify different pieces of the jigsaw.

And not simply as an academic exercise, but rather as we would draw the lessons that we can draw, that they would serve to guide us as a church, as a congregation, as we would seek to grasp this particular nettle of church planting in Europe and starting where better than in the oil capital of Europe.

Well, there are six lessons that I want us to notice in these steps that are taken towards traveling to Philippi and establishing the church in Philippi.

Six lessons that two millennia later are of abiding, and I am persuaded helpful relevance. Now, if it's any comfort to you, when I first was drawing together this sermon, there were eight lessons, and I've chopped it down to six, so I hope you're suitably grateful for that.

Well, let's consider the six lessons that I want us to notice as Paul and his companions would make their way to Philippi to plant a church there.

[5 : 41] The first thing that I would say is, or I would summarize it in this way, is go for it. Now, what do I mean by that as a first lesson for us?

Go for it. Well, when we think of Philippi, when we think of the church that was planted in Philippi, I think if we have some familiarity with the account as we've read it this evening, I think we would be struck by the very dramatic and clear guidance received by Paul and his companions by means of the vision that we've read of there in chapter 16.

This man of Macedonia who in a vision cried out with these words, come over to Macedonia and help us. And if we were to maybe answer the question, well, why was it that a church was planted in Macedonia, we would say, well, it was because of this vision and we would be right in concluding in that way.

But the point I want to make is this, that when the missionary journey began, Paul and Silas knew nothing of Paul, of God's plan for Macedonia.

They knew nothing of where they would end up. They began their journey, they launched out into this second missionary journey, but they didn't know at the beginning that they would end up in Philippi.

[7 : 10] Had they remained in Antioch praying, it's a very good thing to do, of course. Planning, also very important. Considering the pros and cons of one route or another, of one destination or another.

Perhaps waiting for God to tell them where they should go. Had they remained in Antioch in that attitude, then perhaps they would never have discovered God's plan for them to go to Macedonia. Perhaps never would they have seen the vision that they saw or Paul in any case to then share it with his companions. No, without clear instructions, without this vision, they launch out onto their missionary journey.

They go for it as it were, and they do so acting on the grounds of the clearly revealed will of God, as summarized in the matter of missionary expansion by the Great Commission.

They knew the words of Jesus. This was the clearly revealed will of God that his people would reach out into all the world, that his people would be missionaries, that they would take the gospel message to those who had not heard.

[8 : 28] And that was guidance sufficient. They didn't need a vision, they didn't need a dream, they didn't need a specific word of God to launch out on their missionary journey.

Now, it so pleased God on the way, as it were, to grant them this clear, specific guidance. And of course, they were sensitive to it and were obedient to it.

But they didn't wait for a vision to go and plant churches. They didn't wait for a voice from God to go out and evangelize. They didn't wait for some mystical experience to persuade them that this is something that they should do.

No, they simply went for it, as I say, acting on the grounds of the clearly revealed will of God. And so too for us.

We don't need to wait for specific instructions from God to plant churches. The order was given 2,000 years ago.

[9 : 29] We need to go for it and believe and trust that God will direct us on the way. Even if, as we begin the journey, we are unclear.

Even if, as we begin the journey, we don't know what the final destination will be. So there is a lesson there, I think, for us in the example of Paul and Silas.

They begin their journey. They begin to reach out and to go forth while they have not yet received the clear directions that in due course they were going to receive.

So that's the first thing I want us to consider and to take note of. But there's a second lesson that I think we also find in these prior steps to this missionary team arriving on European soil, arriving in Macedonia, and planting the church in Philippi.

The second lesson is this, that it's necessary, it's important to get a team together for the work that is going to be done. It's of great importance always in any missionary endeavor to secure the right human resources for the task to hand.

[10:47] And isn't this always, or often, the big issue for us, and seemingly, often, a stumbling block? Well, yes, it would be good to do these things. It would be good to send missionaries to other lands.

It would be good to plant churches in Aberdeen and in Scotland, but we don't have the people. We don't have the human resources. Didn't even Jesus say that the laborers are few?

What does Paul do in this matter of drawing together, of pulling together, a team for the work that needed to be done? Well, we've already noted that he and Silas had begun their journey, and their journey began by visiting the churches that had been established on their first missionary journey. That is made very clear for us there in verse 36 of chapter 15. Sometime later, Paul said to Barnabas, let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preach the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.

So their journey begins in this way, visiting those places that they had already visited and where they had been enabled by God to plant churches.

[12:05] And in particular, this visiting of these cities and towns brings them to Lystra. And on arrival in Lystra, the opportunity is given to bring on board a Timothy.

There at the beginning of chapter 16, we're introduced to Timothy. He came to Derbe and then to Lystra. That's the references to Paul and Silas where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek.

The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him, and Paul wanted to take him along on the journey. So in Lystra, they identify this young Christian who comes highly recommended.

He had the gifts that were necessary. He was committed to the missionary endeavor and he is eminently suited to the task. Of course, we learn so much more of Timothy.

Subsequently, he proved himself to be of huge value to Paul and to God, especially in the work of the gospel. And so, Timothy comes on board and in one fell swoop, the missionary team grows by 50%.

[13:18] Well, okay, that's simply describing what happened. What is the lesson here for us? Well, I think there is one specific lesson that we can draw from this recruitment of Timothy.

And it is this, that Timothy is a product of the first missionary journey. Timothy is a Christian because of the church planting that had already been done by Paul and his companions.

The one who had come to faith, it would seem, was, first of all, Timothy's mother. We read there in verse 1, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer.

It may be that Timothy himself also came to faith at the same time as his mother. But it may be that his mother first, she then shared what she had heard with her son and he too embraced the faith.

But the thing to stress is this, that he comes to faith as a result of the missionary enterprise. And so, what we discover is that this missionary enterprise is self-perpetuating.

[14:30] In great measure, it feeds and resources itself. So, in answer to the question, but we don't have the people, well, we'll get the people as we go out and do the mission.

If we wait until we have the people, well, maybe we'll never have enough people. See, Paul had already gone out and had planted these churches and as these churches developed and grew, so, they were very fruitful ground for recruiting the further missionaries that were required.

Now, why is this important to notice and to stress? Well, as I've already suggested, often in discussions concerning church planting or missionary work, we are told that we lack the people, that we're too small, that we can't afford to let go of our core human resources.

We would weaken the mother church. We simply don't have the people. Although that concern is understandable, I think it fails to appreciate this bigger picture, that as the Lord prospers the missionary endeavor, as the Lord owns and accompanies the missionary enterprise, so He will provide new believers, new converts, and indeed their children, as is the case of Timothy, who will, in due course, become the missionary labor force.

Who's to say that some of them may not come back to help the mother church, if that is indeed what God would have them do? I think there is another very specific but practical lesson to be drawn from this experience.

[16:16] Who make up this missionary team that plant the church in Philippi? Well, one of the team is Timothy, who was the product of that self-same missionary enterprise of the first journey.

There's a third lesson that I want us to notice in these steps that lead up to the incursion into Macedonia and the establishing of the church in Philippi.

And the third lesson I summarize with this phrase, keep your eye and the ball. Now this particular missionary journey, the second missionary journey, was almost torpedoed before it ever got up a head of steam, if you forgive the mixed metaphors.

And why was that so? Well, Timothy was a good guy. That is clear. We're told, even if we were limited to the information that we have before us in our passage, we're told that the brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him.

He came highly recommended. But there was this detail. And the detail was that he was an uncircumcised Jew. His father, those who understand the original language is much better than myself, assure us that the tense used of the verb would suggest that his father was deceased.

[17:40] So he was a Greek but that he had actually died. But that's really of not great consequence. The point is his father was a Greek and his mother, Eunice, was a Jewess.

Now as a result of this mixed parentage, if we can use that expression, Timothy had not been circumcised. That would seem to be what is behind what is said in verse 3 that Paul wanted to take him along on the journey so he circumcised because of the Jews who lived in that area for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

They knew his father was a Greek and so consequently they knew that he had not been circumcised because his father wouldn't have given importance to that. Perhaps he wouldn't have approved, I don't know.

But the point is they knew that Timothy had not been circumcised. Now what to do? What to do? Bear with me.

We will get to how Paul is keeping his eye on the ball in a moment. But what to do particularly in this matter of Timothy. In the light of chapter 15, chapter 15 describes to us the council at Jerusalem.

[18:53] This huge issue that was discussed about whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised, whether it was necessary for them to be circumcised in order to fully form part of the church.

And Paul had been very clear, very radical, justifiably radical in saying that this was not necessary, that it was altogether wrong to impose on them circumcision.

This was the huge debate in which Paul had taken center stage and he had been enabled by God to win the day. And yet here we have immediately afterwards, Paul is saying that Timothy needs to be circumcised.

And no doubt many would have accused them of hypocrisy. Indeed, to this day people accuse them of hypocrisy as they consider this passage. How could it be that Paul would have insisted on Timothy being circumcised so soon after this huge council where it was established very clearly that circumcision was not necessary for salvation?

So why does Paul do that? Well, we can make two comments in answer to the question. First of all, we have to recognize, or it's evident, that Timothy's situation was different to the one addressed by the council.

[20:14] The council at Jerusalem were considering the situation of Gentile believers. Timothy was not a Gentile. His mother was a Jew. And in the Jewish understanding of nationality or ethnicity or whatever the right word is, Timothy, enjoying a Jewish mother, was a Jew.

So his situation was not the one that was addressed by the council at Jerusalem. The other thing to say is that Paul was concerned to not unnecessarily offend or antagonize Jewish believers.

Had Paul had as a companion in the missionary endeavor, a Jew who was not circumcised, that would have antagonized. It would have offended.

It would have confused Jewish believers. No doubt already somewhat sensitive as a result of the outcome of the council, though they embraced the outcome.

It's worth stressing. And so Paul simply doesn't want to unnecessarily create a difficulty concerning the matter of Timothy and his circumcision.

[21:27] And so, you might say pragmatically, he says, the best thing to do is for Timothy to be circumcised, as it says in the passage, out of concern for the Jews because of the Jews who lived in that area.

He was circumcised. He risks being branded a hypocrite and he circumcises Timothy. Now, we could delve into this in greater detail and explore the ins and outs of this matter, but we're not going to do so.

All we're going to do, and my concern in even addressing the issue, is to draw out this lesson, the third lesson that I want us to draw out and to be mindful of, that in doing what he did, Paul was keeping his eye on the ball.

The priority for Paul was this missionary journey. The priority for Paul was to continue and to reach new communities, new towns, new cities, new provinces with the gospel.

And he knew that if Timothy had remained uncircumcised, that priority could have been threatened. And so he says, no, I'm going to keep my eye on the ball.

[22 : 44] I have to do what I have to do in order to secure what is most important. He doesn't abandon principle. He doesn't do anything that is wrong, but he wisely and very strategically does what is necessary to keep the show on the road, to keep things going, to avoid obstacles being placed in the way of what was most important, that he and his companions should continue in their missionary endeavor.

Now the issue of Timothy being circumcised or Timothy not being circumcised, what should have been done, what should not have been done, it may seem an issue that is so irrelevant to us.

What possible importance could there be to us 2,000 years later this matter of Timothy? Well, perhaps, but the principle that can be drawn of keeping our eye on the ball and not allowing ourselves to be distracted by matters of secondary importance is an abiding principle and a very relevant one as we would seek to engage in God's mission.

Let us be careful that we be not distracted and in this, Paul does teach us a very helpful lesson. But there's a fourth lesson that I think we can draw and it is this, that we should respect the Lord's game plan.

We think of Paul as he began this journey. Paul did have his own game plan as he began his journey. We've already noticed there in verse 36 how he says to Barnabas, let's visit the places we've already been.

[24 : 30] Then we read in verse 41 of cities that they visited, he went through Syria and Cilicia strengthening the churches. In the first verse of chapter 16 we're told that they came to Derbe and then to Lystra.

So there is a game plan. There is a route map that is being followed and it is the one that Paul and Silas presumably sat down and worked on and said, well let's do this, let's go in this direction, let's visit these places.

And I'm sure that in their own mind this plan that they had contemplated not only visiting the existing churches, though that is how they began, but it also would have contemplated planting new ones.

Many suggest as they would follow the route in as much as we're able to follow it from the information that we have, many suggest that Paul had in mind reaching Ephesus and planting a church in Ephesus.

Certainly in verse 6, and we're going to come to this in a moment, we're told of how their intention had been to go to the province of Asia. And Ephesus was located in that province.

[25 : 38] So it seems reasonable to conclude that that is perhaps what Paul had anticipated doing on this journey. And the plan that they had, the plan that Paul had, was a very reasonable plan, a very strategic one.

In the absence of specific instructions from the Lord, Paul and his companions developed a plan of action. But he does so, he does so together with his companions, in the full recognition that it was the Lord's prerogative to direct otherwise if he so chose.

And of course, this is precisely what happens. They go for it, they launch out, they have a plan in place, it's a good plan, it's a reasonable plan, but the Lord has another plan, and he makes that known to them.

In summary, two doors are closed and one door is opened. Then in verse 6, we're told that they were kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.

Then in verse 7, we're told that they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. Two doors are closed. And then in verse 9, we have the vision of the man from Macedonia, come over and help us.

[26 : 56] And a door is open, an unexpected door, but it is open. And Paul and his companions are sensitive to and respect the Lord's game plan when it turns out to be different from their own.

And in this matter of respecting God's plan and God's instructions, there are maybe three aspects that we would do well just to notice. The first one is the need for discernment.

Paul and his companions discerned the voice of God directing them. Now, it's the source of much speculation how God, by His Spirit, directed them.

There are three directions given. Two doors closed, one door open. Now, on one of the occasions, it's made very clear how God directed them.

The vision of the man from Macedonia, it's very clear that was the way God chose to direct them. But concerning the two doors that were closed, it's far from clear the manner in which that happened.

[28 : 01] We're told simply that they were kept from preaching the word in Asia, and we're told also that they were not allowed to enter Bithynia.

But how that happened is frustratingly unclear. We're not told the manner in which God directed them.

Now, there are many ideas that are given. One, I think, very reasonable one is that the instruction was given by a word of prophecy, possibly in one of the churches that they were visiting, or perhaps Paul himself or Silas was given a word from the Lord, a clear word of prophecy, concerning this matter.

It's a possibility. Others suggest that there was a strong inward conviction that they had that persuaded them collectively, Paul and Silas, that this is what they should do and this is what they should not do.

That's also a possibility. Some suggest that simply God directed the circumstances circumstances in such a way that did not allow them to go to Asia, that did not allow them to enter Bithynia.

[29 : 15] In summary, we don't know. We don't know the manner in which God directed them, but what we do know is that God directed them and that they discerned His voice, which really is the important matter.

We could spend a long time considering all the different ideas that are given concerning how we are to understand the manner in which God directed, but we would perhaps gain little from it.

It is interesting to note, and there's maybe something here for us to just ponder on, that even in the case of the vision, where it would seem such a clear form in which God spoke to Paul, even in the case of the vision, it was necessary for the whole team to corporately come to a conclusion concerning its significance.

Notice there in verse 10 that 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. For the first time in the book of Acts, in this chapter, we have the writer speaking in the first person plural, the we passages of Acts, and everybody, or perhaps not everybody, but most are agreed that the reason for that is that Luke joins the missionary band at this point, and so he's able to speak in this way. We did this. But that's not my main concern. The main concern at this point is simply to notice that isn't it interesting that even though Paul receives this vision, it was important for all of them to conclude, presumably after considering the vision that had been told to them by Paul, to conclude, well, what is God saying here?

[30 : 58] and they conclude together that this was indeed God directing them to Macedonia. The point is that they discern the voice of God.

They discern the voice of God and they trust in God's directions. I wonder how they felt when they were having doors closed left, right, and center. I wonder how they felt when they were having to go in directions that they hadn't originally planned.

I wonder how they felt when they were being told to go perhaps to a province that had not been in their original plan. Perhaps they were worried. Perhaps they were concerned.

Perhaps there was a fear as to what awaited them. But they trust God. They hear God's voice and they trust God's direction.

And of course, not only that, but very importantly, they obey. And this is the bottom line. Having discerned God's will, they obey it forthwith. Then in verse 10, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia.

[32 : 04] Paul and his companions respect God's game plan. They had their game plan. They had their route. They had their plans. But when it became clear that God had different plans, they hear His voice, they trust in His wisdom, and they obey His instructions.

Well, what about us? Is it so different today? We might say, well, we read this, and we say, well, that's so different. We don't hear God's voice in this way. We don't have visions and dreams to direct us.

The language perhaps seems very alien to us. But is it actually so very different? Because God is still directing His missionary enterprise.

He is as involved today in directing His people as He was in chapter 16 of the book of Acts. His interest is no less today. He is no less involved in His mission because it is His mission.

And He is no less a God who communicates to His people what they should do and where they should go and what they should do. He continues to speak in the ways that He chooses.

[33 : 15] And so it remains important for us to be a people who discern a God's voice, who trust in His directions and who obey His instructions.

There's a fifth lesson as we come swiftly to a close. And it is this, that Paul, and I'm sure those who were around about him, had a heart for hurting people.

Paul has this vision of a man from Macedonia. He has no idea who this man is, and yet he is powerfully drawn by his cry.

Even the manner in which Paul describes the vision is one that reveals his heart. During the night, Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him.

How do we know about the vision? Well, the only way we can know is because Paul described the vision. It would seem Luke heard firsthand, and so we have it before us in this chapter.

[34 : 17] But even the manner in which it is described, this man crying, begging, come over and help us. There is no doubt that Paul was moved to compassion by this vision that he was given.

He was burdened by the cry that he heard. The image of this man was etched on his soul. To ignore this cry would be to abandon his ministry.

He could do no other than go to Macedonia, and nothing would detain him. Nothing would distract him. There is a hurting man in Macedonia, and he needs help, and Paul will go and help him because he has a heart for hurting people.

Yes, he goes in obedience to God's clear instruction, but he goes also driven by this heart that is hurting for the man who he has seen in his vision.

And this, as we draw the lesson for ourselves, it perhaps doesn't need us to draw it out too much. I hope it's so obvious. This is crucial for us too.

[35 : 28] Do we have a heart for hurting people? Do we hear that voice crying for help? I wonder if the man in the vision even knew what help he needed.

We're not told whether this is a summary of the vision that we have before us, whether these are all the words that he said, we don't know. But what we have before us is very short and is not specific at all.

Come over to Macedonia and help us. We need help. I wonder if he even knew the man in the vision what help was required. Well, I leave you to come to your own conclusions.

But he needed help and Paul wanted to help him. And so as we think of those who live round about us, as we think of those who live in this city of Aberdeen, how many are also crying out for help?

Maybe they don't know what it is that they need. They don't know what help they're looking for. But they know that they need help. And they cry out for help. Do we even hear them?

[36 : 32] And if we hear them, our hearts move to compassion for them. Paul had a heart for hurting people. And then finally, the last thing I want to notice and lesson to draw is that Paul also had a clear vision of the help that he had to give.

Paul knew full well what he had to offer this man in Macedonia. And that is clear in that final verse of our passage.

After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to help Macedonia, no, to preach the gospel to them.

The cry, the request, was for help. And Paul says, well, I have help to give. And the help that I can give is to preach the gospel. That is what I have.

I don't have money to give. I don't have medical expertise that I can deploy in their favor. I can't help them in maybe many other ways. But one thing I can do is I can preach the gospel.

[37 : 39] That I can do. That is the help that I can offer. That is the help that I can give. I can tell this man in Macedonia about Jesus. And I can tell the people of Philippi about Jesus, about who He is and what He has done and how He saves sinners.

That I can do. This help I can give. As we've noted, the man from Macedonia was hardly very specific.

But Paul has no doubt that he can help. And so they cross the Aegean Sea from Troas to Macedonia in the sure and certain conviction that they will be able to help. What about us?

If we are to effectively reach Europe, if we are to have an impact in this particular European city where God has placed us, if we are to plant healthy, growing churches like the church in Philippi, we need to learn in this matter from Paul and his companions.

In a nutshell, we need a clear understanding of and confidence in the gospel message. What rings through here, what is evident here, is that Paul has great confidence in his message.

[38 : 53] There is a man who needs help. Well, I can give him help because I know the gospel. There is a man who is crying out for help. Well, I have something for him. And it is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He has no doubt that the gospel will respond to this man's needs. He has no doubt that the gospel is what this man needs more than anything else. He has this deep confidence in the message that he is going to proclaim.

And so, we too must share that confidence. Our confidence is not in ourselves. Our confidence is not in the messenger, but our confidence most assuredly must be in the message that we proclaim. Confidence that the message we have been given is a message that responds to the deepest needs of hurting people. And so, when the man from Macedonia cried out, come and help us, Paul was sure that he had help to offer.

And when the man from Torrey or the woman from King Korth or the immigrant who lives in Rosemount and we could multiply the example, says, I need help too. Well, we have help to give.

[40 : 06] And the help that we have to give is the good news concerning Jesus Christ. Let us pray.