

Gospel Triumph: Come and Help Us – Acts 16:6-40

When I was in seminary there was a debate going on among Christian scholars concerning whether or not God knew the future. Now initially you may think, well that seems crazy, of course God knows the future. But the truth behind the discussion of God's knowledge of the future was really God's sovereign control over the future. Is God really sovereign over all things? The group of scholars trying to argue that God doesn't ultimately know the future were really just taking a very common belief to its logical end. This common belief is that there are some things outside of God's sovereign control and that to maintain human autonomy we need to limit God's sovereign power in some way. And they were simply arguing that if you even move one item outside of God's sovereignty then God can't possibly know the future.

The 19th century British Pastor Charles Spurgeon had this to say about God's sovereignty. *Blessed is that man who has done with chance, who never speaks of luck, but believes that from the least even to the greatest, all things are ordained of the Lord. We dare not leave out the least event! The creeping of an aphid upon a rosebud is as surely arranged by the decree of Providence as the march of a pestilence through a nation. Believe this, for if the least is omitted from the supreme government, so may the next be, and the next, until nothing is left in the Divine hands. There is no place for chance, since God fills all things.* – Charles Spurgeon

In our study of Acts we've talked a lot about the gospel and the mission, but behind the movement of the gospel forward stands the sovereign power and authority of God. We've seen this some, but this morning in Acts 16 we will see the Gospel move into Europe for the first time and only by God's sovereign power. So, in Acts 16:6-40 we are going to see **3 Responses to Gods' Sovereign Hand in the Mission.**

1. Walk in God's Sovereign Guidance (vv. 6-10)

Last week we saw the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey in Acts. Look back to 15:36. You will remember that Paul and Barnabas split over John Mark,

but ultimately this led to Barnabas taking John Mark and going to Cyprus and Paul taking Silas and heading north through Syria and Cilicia into Asia Minor. Eventually Paul and Silas end up in Lystra and Derbe, cities Paul had been to many years earlier. Look at 16:1 and then what happened in these cities in verse 5. So, they continued on. Look at verse 6.

Now, at this point I do need to pull out a map again to help you see where they are. I don't know if you can follow the purple line leaving Antioch and traveling through Cilicia and into Galatia. Verse 6 says that they were forbidden by the Spirit to speak the word in Asia, which you can see here on the map was a region or province of Rome at this time. Probably Paul and Silas meant to travel due West into Asia, but the Spirit kept them from this.

So, they headed north through this very wild and sparsely populated region and attempted to go even further north. But look at verse 7. Twice so far we've seen the Spirit keep them from entering certain regions and cities. Why? The text doesn't tell us. But look at verse 8. They end up in Troas, which was about a 300 mile walk from Lystra, or 20 days worth of walking. All this walking, with no real evangelistic opportunities and no real idea of where they are supposed to end up.

But in Troas they finally get some direction. Look at verse 9. You can see on the map that Macedonia was across the Aegean Sea and would move them into Europe. Paul sees this vision and brings it to his companions to figure out what to do. Look at verse 10.

Now, let's talk about this whole journey from Lystra to Troas. It says twice that the Spirit blocked them from going into regions and once that God gave Paul a direct vision to guide them into Macedonia. How exactly does the Spirit direct them here? Impression? Still small voice? Feeling? Circumstances? Armed guards blocking their path? Strangely shaped cloud? Coincidence? The text just doesn't say, and we should not try to read into this just like we shouldn't assume from this that God will direct us through visions and dreams.

Here's the point. God guides and directs in His ways and in His timing, but even when Paul had a direct vision, he still discussed it with his companions, and they

had to conclude that God wanted them in Macedonia. Please don't make decisions based on impressions, or a sense that God wants you to choose this over that. Instead, act according to the best wisdom you have as you ask God for help and trust His sovereign guidance. Don't fret. And it's beautiful to act and watch God work because its then we get to see His grace on full display.

2. Watch God's Many-Sided Grace (vv. 11-34)

Now, we are going to walk through this section quickly, but this is the longest description in Acts of Paul's initial ministry in a city. In these verses we see God's grace encounter 3 very different people. Each of these are a result of God's sovereignty working and moving while Paul and Silas simply do what they are supposed to do. God exercises His sovereignty through means. In other words, don't sit around and expect God to forcibly and supernaturally stand you up and make you go work out, or get a job, or share the gospel, or anything else. God uses means.

Look at verses 11-12. God didn't tell Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke which city to go to, but they chose to make their way to Philippi, which was clearly a significant metropolitan area. Look at verse 13. There's apparently no synagogue in Philippi, so they do the next best thing for them, a place of prayer outside the city itself. And notice how Gods sovereignty works. Look at verses 14-15.

Lydia, a wealthy fabric maker, who was apparently a proselyte to Judaism, meets Paul's group, here's the gospel from Paul, and God sovereignly moves in her heart. She's the first encounter of grace in Philippi. Let's move to the next which is also sovereignly arranged by God. Look at verse 16. Slavery masters would often exploit their slaves in all sorts of ways and this girl is demon-possessed and is used by her owners for financial gain. Look at verse 17. Just like happened with Jesus, the demon recognizes Jesus and understands that a power far greater is present. Look at verse 18.

While this girls words are true, her pronouncements, ultimately coming from the Demon, would have confused the message of Paul's gospel with dark spiritual

powers. He patiently waits but ultimately speaks into the situation based on Christ's victory over darkness.

Her owners don't like losing their income stream, and now God sovereignly moves Paul and Silas into a rough situation to meet the 3rd recipient of grace. Look at verse 19.

Notice that the slave girl's owners shift the accusation. They are upset about their money, but they lie to play to the sympathies of the government and the very pro Roman crowds. Look at verses 20-24.

So, Paul and Silas are thrown into prison after a solid beating from the officials. They are put in the worst part of the prison and securely fastened into stocks. This would have been incredibly uncomfortable. And yet, notice their response. Verse 25. Come on now. You know I'd be complaining up a storm and getting Sam Bernstein on the phone. But they are praying and singing and trusting God's sovereignty and apparently the other prisoners are listening.

And again, God shows up in a powerful and sovereign way. Look at verses 26-28. Paul's first priority is the gospel. Most of us would have split the second we could get out of that prison and said something like, "Well, that jailer is part of the corrupt government that unjustly threw us in here anyway. He's going to get what's coming to him." But they remain and God provides an amazing opportunity for them to speak the gospel to one who desperately needs it. Look at verses 29-34.

3 different stories where God is at work, but at work through means. God knew where He wanted Paul and Silas. By the river, being followed by a slave girl shouting at them, falsely accused and in prison, in the middle of an earthquake, in a jailer's house in the middle of the night. God directed and Paul and Silas simply trusted His guidance and spoke the truth into each situation.

When I think of this story of Paul and Silas in jail, I can't help but imagine some sense of relaxation into God's sovereignty and care for them that allows them to pray and sing in the middle of the night in chains. You and I can learn to relax into God's sovereign power as well and trust His guidance of our lives.

But while Paul and Silas are relaxing into God's care, it by no means indicates that they are passive. They are actively prizing the reputation and mission of the church.

3. Work for the Church's Good Name (vv. 35-40)

Look at verses 35-36. This seems good, but Paul doesn't just let it go. Look at verse 37. Paul is not the type of guy to insist on his own personal rights. Listen to 1 Cor. 9:12. This is in the context of his right to financial remuneration in ministry. He forgoes this right for the good of the gospel.

So, why does he insist on the magistrates in Philippi recognizing their wrong here? Well, it's interesting that Paul doesn't proclaim his status as a Roman citizen until now. He said nothing to defend himself before being thrown into prison or while he was in prison. He waits until they are releasing him.

There will be several stories over the next few chapters where the church will come into conflict with Roman culture and government. Paul's concern here is not for his own personal rights, but for the reputation of these new believers and the mission of the church in Philippi moving forward. Paul's Roman citizenship wasn't all that important to him, and he used it when it could be used for the advancement of the gospel. You can see what was important to him after he is released. Look at verses 38-40.

There's a danger for Christians in letting our priorities get out of whack or beginning to identify our temporary nation with God's kingdom. There are wonderful blessings of being an American citizen, just like there were wonderful blessings to being a Roman citizen. But those blessings are to be subservient to the purposes of God's kingdom. There are tools to be used for Him.

"Acts is not a guidebook for political action, but Luke does show us that the early Christians do not intend to subvert the government. They conform to it except when the gospel is at stake. The Christians in Acts do not show great concern for what their actions may mean in terms of the Roman Empire. Their concern is to take the gospel to every class of citizen in the empire and to those in every nation

under or outside Rome's influence. Politics has a place, but the gospel is eternal." –
Brian Vickers

So, I hope this morning this passage can help to ease your heart into trust in God's sovereignty in your life and in the advancement of the gospel. He's clearly in control and working all things for His glory and our good. We can trust that and live in freedom from pressure to navigate it all perfectly. He's got it. Let's pray.