



CLOSED DOORS, NEW HORIZONS

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 16:6–15
33rd Message
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And I will lead the blind
in a way that they do not know,
in paths that they have not known
I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I do,
and I do not forsake them.

Isaiah 42:16 (ESV)

The prophet Isaiah addressed these wonderful words to displaced Jews who were smothered in the darkness of an endless exile. God promised that he would come to them and lead them “in a way they do not know...turning their darkness into light and the rough places into level ground.”

- Have you ever felt like you were groping in the dark?
- Have you ever prayed for guidance and it seemed like God did not answer?
- Or worse yet, have you felt like you were doing what God called you to do, and yet you ended up at a dead end?
- Have you ever felt unrecognized or overlooked when you have so much to give?

Would it encourage you to know that the apostle Paul had a similar experience?

We are in the book of Acts as Paul has just set out his second missionary journey. Sadly it did not begin well, as Paul and Barnabas got into a heated disagreement that split the team. But God in his grace put the pieces back together, creating two teams with colleagues more suited to complement each other with their gifts and personalities. Barnabas took John Mark and went back to Cyprus, while Paul chose Silas and Timothy to revisit the cities where Paul first preached the gospel and to deliver “the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem” (Acts 16:4). In every city the news from Jerusalem infused the churches with a burst of new life, strengthening their faith and making them bold in their witness, so that “they increased in numbers daily” (16:5). Luke’s summary concludes what F.F. Bruce calls “perhaps the most crucial phase of Luke’s narrative.”¹ The church survived a serious attack and the unanimous decision by the apostles and elders preserved the purity of the gospel and strengthened the community of faith in the bonds of love. As John Stott affirms, “The Jerusalem Council secured a double victory—a victory of truth in confirming the gospel of grace, and a victory of love in preserving the fellowship by sensitive concessions to conscientious Jewish scruples.”²

Having completed their initial mission, Paul and his companions now set their sights on new un-evangelized areas. This was Paul’s life’s purpose: “to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written, ‘Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand’” (Rom 15:20–21).

I. Sign Posts into Unchartered Territory

A. Closed doors

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. (Acts 16:6–8)

Filled with joy for what God had accomplished and great expectations for what lay ahead, the happy trio set out into uncharted territory. But where should they go? Pisidian Antioch was close to the border of Asia Minor and the Via Sebaste (the well-paved Roman highway) could take them southwest into the heart of the province and ultimately to Ephesus, its capital some 300 miles away on the coast. In fact they may have headed in that direction, but Luke records that the Holy Spirit prevented them from speaking the Word in the Roman province of Asia.

If this was not to be the field of their evangelistic activity for the present, then the most logical place to go was further north where they could preach the gospel in the Greek cities of Bithynia. Located on the southern shore of the Black Sea, Bithynia was a praetorian province and a thriving commercial center with an established Jewish community. But once again “the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them.” We are not told how the Spirit made his will known. It could have been by a strong inner prompting, or a prophetic word (Silas was a prophet) or an external circumstance (Jewish opposition or a legal ban). Whatever the means, it was clear to the team that with the western and northern routes blocked, the only option left open to them was to go northwest. In blind obedience, they trek down the road for another 200 miles with no opportunity to preach all the way to the Aegean seaport of Troas, which ironically was in the province of Asia!

They have come a long way, but without any real sense of direction. Luke covers their wandering in a mere two verses, but the overall distance they travelled was well over 300 miles in a very circuitous route that took several weeks. As N. T. Wright observes,

Like the children of Israel in the wilderness looking for the pillar of cloud and fire, they are relying on the spirit of Jesus, and the spirit appears to be allowing them to wander this way and that without a clear sense of guidance.³

Given that Paul had a clear and proven strategy, plus an exceptional team, it seems strange that the only divine direction they get is negative. Until now their ministry had been extremely fruitful, but suddenly they are blocked and shut down with no pastoral or evangelistic opportunities in sight. One can only imagine how perplexed, exhausted and discouraged they were by the time they arrived in Troas. It must have been a real test for them all of them, especially Timothy, who must have wondered, “Is this what I signed up for?”

They seem caught in a liminal space—the space between the “tried and true” and a new beginning. “Liminal” is derived from the Latin word *limen*, meaning “threshold,” and suggests “an initiation of a process, coming to the threshold of something new.”⁴ It is an uncomfortable place to be in a time of transition of ambiguity and waiting with no clear direction; however from a Biblical perspective, these times are part and parcel of everyone’s spiritual journey and are essential for our character formation. “They prove to be times where faith in God deepens and matures, seen and unseen vice is purged, and virtue is cultivated,”⁵ resulting in a more authentic life. For example consider...

Abraham and Sarah’s endless waiting for a child;
 Jacob’s twenty years of exile under Laban’s roof;
 Joseph’s thirteen years of imprisonment under Pharaoh;
 Moses’ forty years in exile in the desert of Midian;
 David’s seven years of running from Saul in the wilderness.

As we look at Paul’s situation, one could say these weeks were profitable for Paul and Silas “to get to know each other better and for them both to act as mentors and guides for Timothy.”⁶ That may be true, but more importantly I believe the Spirit was probing Paul’s soul. Paul had not left Antioch with a clear conscience. The way he treated Barnabas, his longtime friend and mentor, and the angry way they parted was shameful to the whole congregation. I suspect guilt was following Paul every step of the way, replaying the shameful scene over and over in his memory. (I can testify from personal experience that it is impossible to minister with boldness and freedom in a new situation when you’ve left broken relationships in your wake.) This may explain why God doesn’t give them more specific guidance until they are exhausted and at the end of themselves. That is the point at which we are able to hear God’s still small voice and examine ourselves.

Reading between the lines in the letters Paul wrote to the churches he planted in Greece, you can see the fruit of the Spirit’s convicting work within his soul. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul gives a treatise on spiritual gifts, explaining that their diverse function and unified purpose are derived from the personhood of the Trinity.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.” (1 Cor 12:4–6)

Then he spells out the implication of those verses in black and white; powerful words of conviction for how he had treated Barnabas and John Mark.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” (1 Cor 12:21)
 In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul puts the final nail in the coffin of pride. **And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. (1 Cor 13:2)**

In Philippians he writes,

And this is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. (Phil 1:9–10)

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. (Phil 2:1–3)

It may not be an overstatement to say that Paul’s emphasis on “humility,” “love,” and “unity” in his letters grew out of the soil that was cultivated in this liminal desert of wandering.

B. An open window

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. (16:9–10)

After weeks walking, waiting and praying with no place to turn, God breaks through with a nighttime vision, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Originally Paul had hoped to plant more churches in Asia Minor, but God’s vision prompts him in a new direction, to set sail from Troas and to break new ground in Greece. It’s important to note that they did not see the vision as authoritative by itself, but as one piece of the equation of how God guides. “Just as prophesies needed to be tested (1 Cor 12:10; 14:29), so Paul’s dream needed to be tested.”⁷ The verb *sumbibazō* translated “concluded” means literally “to bring together,” which implies that they took into consideration all that had transpired during their weeks of travel, pondered over what it might mean, then drew their conclusion together.⁸ John Stott gives this masterful summary,

From this we may learn that usually God’s guidance is not negative only but also positive (some doors close, others open); not circumstantial only, but rational (thinking about our situation); not personal only, but also corporate (a sharing of the data with others, so that we can mull over them together and reach a common mind).⁹

In God’s lavish grace, he grants Paul’s weary team, not only a vision for a new direction, but also another outstanding addition to the team. You may have noticed the subtle change of pronouns—“they” becomes “we” (“we sought to go on to Macedonia”). Most scholars agree that this is Luke who joins Paul and companions in Troas, first as a physician, then as a historian.

Like an artist who discreetly hides his signature in the corner of his masterpiece, Luke changes pronouns from “they” to “we” in four sections of the book (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:8–18; 27:1–28:16), making him an eyewitness alongside the apostle Paul. It’s hard to comprehend the magnitude of Luke’s contribution. Like Timothy, he became an extremely loyal friend to Paul, who called him “the beloved physician” and faithful colleague (Col 4:14; Philemon 24). Without Luke’s writings we would have no record of the early church, the historical context of Paul’s letters, or the detailed accounts of Jesus’ birth.

God’s grace has transformed Troas from a dark dead end to a place of renewed vision and new friendships.

II. A Beachhead on a New Continent (16:11–15)

A. Journey to Philippi

So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. (16:11–12)

With favorable winds they make the 150-mile journey across the Aegean in two days. On the way they stop at Samothrace, a rocky island whose peak rises 5000 feet, making it a landmark in the area. The island was known as a “sacred” island and was the center of a famous mystery cult. The following day Paul and his friends land in Neapolis, the port of Philippi. From Neapolis it was a twelve-mile walk to Philippi along the Via Egnatia, the great Roman highway linking the Adriatic with the Aegean Sea. Luke notes, perhaps with some pride (some scholars believe it was Luke’s hometown), that Philippi was a “leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony.” A Roman Colony was a mini-Rome with Roman laws and constitution.

The most significant event in Philippi’s history came in the early stage of the Roman civil war, when in the Battle of Philippi in 42 BC Mark Antony and the young Octavian Caesar defeated Brutus and Cassius, who had killed Octavian’s adoptive father Julius Caesar two years before. Antony and Octavian then enlarged the city once more, establishing it as a Roman colony to settle veteran soldiers. (Rome was anxious not to have old soldiers coming to Italy claiming or simply seizing land as a reward for loyal service).¹⁰

Its strategic location on one of the major trading routes made Philippi an attractive setting for Paul and his companions to begin their work, but with no Jewish synagogue, it would require new and creative approaches.

B. Establishing a beachhead on a new continent

And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us. (16:13–15)

Philippi did not have a significant enough population of Jews to support a synagogue. There was, however a “place of prayer,” where a small number of Jews and Gentile God-fearers met to pray outside the city. Keener writes, “Foreign cults that lacked critical mass to be established in the locale often were excluded from the city proper.”¹¹ The best place to find them would be by a body of flowing water, which was needed for cleansing rituals. After a few days of getting settled in the city, Paul and his friends discover a group of women by the river flowing outside the city gate. Paul takes the role of teacher by sitting down and explaining the good news that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah and the world’s Lord. Contrary to Paul’s vision depicting a “man of Macedonia,” the first responder is not a man but a woman, and she is not from Macedonia, but Thyatira, a city in the interior of Asia Minor. Lydia was a businesswoman described as a “seller of purple.”

In Lydia’s hometown of Thyatira a technique had been developed to procure the prestigious purple dye from the root of the madder plant, a much cheaper way of producing the dye than extracting it from shellfish. The implication is that Lydia was a woman of independent means: she was the head of a household, perhaps indicating that she had been divorced or widowed.¹²

Lydia’s conversion is immediate and profoundly simple—“*the Lord opened her heart* to pay attention to what was said by Paul.” It was like fruit that is so ripe, it falls off the tree with the wind. Wasting no time, she is baptized along with her entire household, a testimony to her influence. To express her appreciation, she insists that the whole party — Paul, Luke, Silas and Timothy — come and stay in her home as evidence that she was faithful. Hospitality was a sacred duty and privilege for a host. Her passion and persistence are similar to Abraham’s when three divine guests showed up at his door.

He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and said, “O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant.” (Gen 18:2–3)

To Lydia, Paul and his companions were like angels, God’s messengers, sent to evangelize her city. Following Jesus’ instruction (Luke 9:4; 10:5–7), Paul’s acceptance transformed her home into the first church of Macedonia.

III. Closed Doors, New Horizons: Do You Know the Way?

And I will lead the blind
in a way that they do not know,
in paths that they have not known
I will guide them. (Isa 42:16)

A. God’s “No” becomes “Yes”

Paul’s wanderings, though they seemed “aimless” at the time, led him directly to Lydia at the side of the river. Through her openness and obedience to God’s calling, the first church in Macedonia was established, followed by Thessalonica and Corinth. A map of Paul’s third journey reveals these churches, along with those in South Galatia, were “strategic points on the circumference of the circle of which Ephesus was the center.”¹³ Once they were established Paul went to Ephesus and remained there for two years teaching in the hall of Tyrannus. Despite what appeared to be Paul’s “aimless and fruitless” wanderings, God initial prohibitions did not diminish Paul’s strategy, rather they expanded it to such a degree “that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10).

Which brings us back to our original questions: In our daily lives, how do we find the courage to continue in faith when we are just “spinning our wheels”?

- Like we are groping in the dark?
- When we are praying for guidance and we feel like God is not answering?
- When we feel set aside, obsolete, forgotten?
- Or, most challenging of all, when we believe we are in God’s will, and we keep arriving at dead ends?

B. New thresholds out of old ways

How many of us have experienced a career path where the doors keep closing? How do we keep moving forward when each position

is more frustrating that the last? As hiring managers, do we have eyes to see (like Lydia) that perhaps God has sent us someone completely unexpected who will bring something entirely new into our fixed little culture? Do we have the courage to open our hearts?

C. Which absolute values take priority?

Like Paul or Barnabas, do we have a colleague in ministry whom we discarded, because we were stubborn in our own vision of how things must be and were unable to expand our horizons to take in God's perspective of something bigger or better? Like Barnabas, have we had to sacrifice one brother (Barnabas sacrifices Paul's love and acceptance) in order to stand up for another.

D. New traveling companions

Do we have the wisdom to recognize when we have been given gifted traveling companions who will make the journey with us, support us in both its joys and sorrows, document our triumphs and trials and stand with us until the end? Do you have eyes to see a Silas, a Luke, or a Lydia in your life?

E. Walking in Paul's footsteps

On a personal note, I have observed that my life has been tracking with the events of Paul's second journey. A couple of years ago I was in a liminal space. Things that used to work in ministry were no longer producing the fruit they once had. Getting older, I was beginning to feel out-of-date and obsolete. Like Paul, I had experienced a rift with a brother and, though it had gone on a long time, I tried to ignore it. Eventually some dear brothers took the bull by the horns and provided us with an extremely gifted counselor who gave us eyes to see how differently God had wired us and to value each other's unique personalities and gifts. Once I was able to identify and take responsibility for my sin, the dull haze that shrouded me lifted and I felt alive again. It wasn't long before new and surprising opportunities opened up to teach my Psalms and poetry course at church and abroad. Like Paul's ministry in Philippi, the invitations came through gifted women. In my weekly Psalms class at church, half a dozen women were instrumental in leading worship, prayer, hospitality, teaching and counseling. Four travelled with me to help me teach and illustrate the material in Durango, Colorado, Sedona, Arizona and Provence, France. In each of those settings we were received by a "Lydia," whose vision had inspired their churches to extend the invitation to us, and upon arriving "prevailed upon us" with her lavish hospitality. And grace upon grace, before we traveled to Sedona, God provided a gifted colleague to chronicle the event, which she entitled, "When Grief Gets a Voice." Here is a brief excerpt.

She is already on her feet when Brian asks, "Who wants to go first?" If she could, she'd run down the aisle but she can't because she's old, her hips locking and swaying as she careens towards the front of the sanctuary. Her hair is white and thin, teased and sprayed into her preferred style. Her face wrinkled, sun-spotted, she is almost a fairy-tale crone, except that her whole body teems with energy, her eyes lit with the determination only found in the young. She has something to say, and not even hell itself could

prevail against her. She is one of 30, 40 perhaps, women who, over the course of the next 3 hours, will grip a crumpled scrap of paper, stumble forward to a hot mic, and tell the rest of us the secrets that have been hiding in plain sight for years, sometimes for a lifetime...Woman after woman comes forward, dons the prayer shawl, steps to the mic, and gives her grief a voice. They are old and they are young. Some have walked by faith for decades, some for days. Grief doesn't discriminate between the beautiful and the homely, and so both come forward to sing their lament. Some voices ring out strong and true, telling stories that have long needed an audience to bear witness. Other voices falter, deep wounds that feel as fresh today as they did the day they were first inflicted. One by one, they name the thing that has been with them, festering in deep and dark places where they believe no one wants to enter...The list is as long as the afternoon, as story after story is told, and with each new voice we all of us bear up, willingly, under an expansive sorrow. It's why we are here.¹⁴

So often in the church we are so focused on strategic planning, outreach and mission that we don't acknowledge or equip people how to process the seasons of life where they find themselves in a liminal space, wandering in a wasteland. The good news is that by slowing down and listening deeply to the silence, it strengthens our faith and matures our character in ways success never can. Though it may not appear that way for an individual or an organization in the beginning, in the end its fruit is immeasurable.

1. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 234.

2. John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 257.

3. N. T. Wright, *Paul, A Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 174.

4. Thomas J. Rundel, "Liminal Spaces: A Narrative Spirituality of the Bible" (2015), 4. Doctor of Ministry. Paper 109. <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/109>.

5. Rundel, "Liminal Spaces," 10.

6. Wright, *Paul*, 175.

7. Craig S. Keener, *Acts, An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 3:2350.

8. For an excellent treatment on "God's guidance," see Dr. Bruce K. Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

9. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 261.

10. Wright, *Paul*, 178.

11. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2384.

12. Wright, *Paul*, 179.

13. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 328.

14. Karen Dabaghian, "When Grief Gets a Voice," Sedona Women's Psalms Retreat, 2018.