

SUMMER 1 - Acts 16-28 - God's Guidance

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[0 : 0 0] well friends I'll pray again our Lord God please open our eyes that we might behold wonderful things from your word and soften our hearts that we might receive your word and transform our wills that we might be doers of it loose our tongues that we might proclaim it and we ask this for the glory of your son who is your living word and in whose name we pray amen well friends my memory of course might be playing tricks however according to memory it was one of the most miserable times in my early Christian life yet at the same time it had the appearance of being the most spiritual I you see I just become a Christian and having just become a Christian I reveled in the immediacy of a personal relationship with God you see before becoming a Christian God had not mattered to me at all but now everything had to be done to please him and pleasing him meant that I'd no longer follow in inverted commas the ways of the world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air pleasing God meant no longer in another scripture gratifying the cravings of the sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts instead I was now a person who was going to be led by the spirit and that's where my misery began if you'll pardon me saying so after all what did it mean to be led by the spirit how does the spirit lead how does God guide you see I wanted to be in God's place and I wanted to be doing God's will but how could I find that will so long hours between lectures at uni were spent thinking these issues through was it right to spend money here and on this should I go here or there what job does God want me to do if and if I ever finish this university course is God calling me into full-time ministry what about the attractive girl that I've just met should I take leadership of a section at beach mission does God want me to talk to this or that person is it God's will to heal this or that friend of this or that ailment and before long all of life became for me an issue of guidance I must find God's will after all God has a plan for me and it was my job to find it anything else saying God's plan was a second best now being young as a Christian I felt inept and unskilled where others to talk so confidently about what God or had or had not said to them and so I invested in a number of books on the topic of guidance and I poured over them and I worked out an intricate system of guidance which consisted of looking at circumstances looking for feelings of peace prayer Bible reading dreams inner voices and all a whole host of thing that probably all of you have experienced as well the issue of guidance affected everything that I did it deeply affected my prayer life and before asking God for things I first had to know and check out what his will was so I'd know whether or not he would answer me anyway everything became subject to my system

I never quite got to the stage I should confess to you of seeking guidance about how many eggs I should have for breakfast and what color socks I should wear but let me tell you I was not far off it and my little system began to tie me in knots rather than adding to and aiding my service of the Lord Jesus it restricted me and then came an invitation to speak to a youth group on the matter and so I dragged out my concordance and let me tell you the the surprises came thick and fast the first thing I found was that no one in the New Testament seemed to talk about guidance much at all second in my few glimpses I took into the lives of Christians that we find in the New Testaments in the New Testament I found that they didn't talk or act about the topic the way my friends did and the way I had and I did a third when the term will of God occurred in the New Testament it generally didn't refer to God's will for me individually rather it seemed to refer to God's will for the whole world and so began a revolution in my life now you might wonder why I've introduced this first summer Bible study in the man in this manner and with this topic well I do so because the question of God's guidance does occur in this particular passage and in this passage just as the one before it in Acts 15 that issue is raised in one way or another and although it's not the main point of the passage the passage does have some important things to say and although we're not explicitly taught about guidance there is much we can learn about it that will inform us on this topic so I just want to flag that after we work through the passage

I'm going to return to this issue just briefly at the end to try and say a few things about this topic having grappled with this passage I'm then going to just take a sideways glance at this topic I do so because it is raised throughout Acts but I think this passage raises it explicitly in a particular way but let's get underway with our passage for tonight so open your Bibles at Acts 15 in fact you might open your Bibles at Acts 1 instead so start at Acts chapter 1 do you remember what happened in Acts 1?

Jesus had died we'd heard about that in Luke's first volume he'd been raised by God and he appeared to his disciples on various occasions after his resurrection now on one occasion Acts 1 tells us he was told they were told to wait he told them actually to wait in Jerusalem and of course these Christians these new Christians had multiple questions that plagued their minds it appeared you see that they had finally realised that he was the Messiah and with that realisation a whole lot of other things began to fall into place including the realisation that now they had a king then perhaps the kingdom was near to restoration and so they asked Jesus if this was in fact the case you can see it there in Acts 1 verse 6 and his response was to tell them not to be concerned about times and dates but rather to be concerned about witnessing to him before that day came and as we worked through Acts a couple of years ago we saw all of this happening you see first they did witness to their fellow Jews then God reached out to Samaritans in Acts chapter 8 and God prepared an apostle to the Gentiles in Acts 9 and then he said sent Peter to the Gentiles in Acts 10 and 11 and Paul and Barnabas were commissioned as missionaries in the early part of chapter 13 and they embarked upon their first missionary journey and the map I've included for you in the outline shows you the extent of that journey you can see where they went starting at Antioch they go across to Cyprus then they go up toward Galatia and then they come back again but that mission caused some significant difficulties because of the significant number of Gentiles who were converted and so what happened in chapter 15 is that they convened a conference to discuss whether Gentiles had effectively to become Jews in order to belong and the conclusion from that conference which was the last talk that we looked at a couple of years ago is that they did not have to become Jews and it was agreed that a delegation would take a letter to the church at Antioch telling them of this conclusion why?

because Antioch was the door to all of these other churches which had many more Gentiles in them you can see the content of the letter in Acts 15 verses 23 to 29 and after its delivery Paul and Barnabas stayed there in Antioch and they taught the word of God in Antioch and encouraged the Christians there and that brings us to our passage for tonight and the presenting issue that we find in this passage is straightforward look at it in verse 36 Paul initiates what amounts to a follow-up strategy with Barnabas he says to Barnabas let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preach the word of the Lord and see how they are doing now friends let me say that while the reasons for revisiting are undoubtedly pastoral I don't think that is all that is going on so while undoubtedly they are wanting to visit those folk and to see how they're going in their faith that is not all that's going on look on to chapter 16 verse 4 and you'll notice something else in verse 4 we're told of the specifics of what they do when they get there as they travelled from town to town they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey so you see there is a follow-up but there's also a communication of decisions both work together to strengthen the churches in the faith and you can see that in chapter 16 verse 5 but let's return back to 36 from the previous chapter

[9 : 51] Paul has proposed a follow-up visit now look at 37 and 38 Barnabas wanted to take John also called Mark with them but Paul did not think it wise to take them take him because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work you see as they were going on that first missionary journey they crossed they went up to Pamphylia and Mark goes home we know from earlier in Acts that Barnabas is a real people person he is the son of encouragement we all also know from Colossians chapter 4 verse 10 that he is related to Mark he is Mark is his cousin perhaps he Barnabas wants to give Mark a second chance and it's not as though the Apostle Paul is not a people person as well the epistles will tell you that he is but we also know about Paul don't we he's a very focused man isn't he a very focused man he is quite task oriented and he's a very strategic thinker in terms of gospel and his proclamation and I wonder whether perhaps he thinks that someone who's deserted him on the job might put the work of the gospel at risk he might desert again and that might have impact on the proclamation of the gospel and on this missionary band's task he certainly thought

Mark might be a liability and he apparently was not willing to shift on the issue of whether he be taken or not that is Paul was definite not he will not come look at verse 39 it tells us about the outcome there is a sharp disagreement and the words in the original are very strong words we don't know if this disagreement expressed itself in anger but the word can have connotations of anger but it certainly caused a rift in relationship the first half of verse 39 puts it very clearly the second half of verse 39 followed by verses 40 to 41 tell us of the results of this disagreement they had such a sharp disagreement we read that they parted company Barnabas took Mark he sailed for Cyprus or they sailed for Cyprus and Paul chose Silas and left commended by believers to the grace of the Lord he went through Syria and Cilicia strengthening his churches by the way as far as I can tell though some of the commentators differ

I think it's only Paul and Silas who are commended by the churches so I don't know if the church of Antioch itself had some view on all of this question but certainly we know that Paul and Silas left with their blessing friends these verses when you look at them are quite sad aren't they but they are also very informative verses we don't know about the ongoing history of the relationship between Paul and Barnabas they're only mentioned together once more Paul mentions Barnabas once more in 1st Corinthians but we do know just a little bit just a little bit about Paul's relationship with Mark in prison later in life Paul writes to Timothy and says these words of John Mark he says only this is a he says only Luke is with me get Mark and bring him with you because he is helpful to me in my ministry it's a great final line isn't it on this relationship but let me tell you also why I find these verses informative first in my view they do betray at least two sorts of ministries and some of the sorts of disposition of people who work with them let me explain on the one hand it appears to me you have Paul representative of a highly focused often task oriented ministry that is so committed to its task that it cannot easily keep up keep those who are not like minded you may have met such ministries

Paul's missionary band seems a little like this that is it seems it takes up people who are focused and they're carefully chosen ministries I think that you might find around the world that are like this one that I'm very familiar with is student ministry which is often like this it's highly evangelistic it's missional on the other hand there are more people oriented groups who work hard at including people and are more accepting of difference or lack of focus a Barnabas the son of encouragement seems to be like this as a person and local churches are often like this working hard at being inclusive of groups of people and of all diversity my experience is that those two sorts of groups and people don't always understand each other very well and perhaps you've experienced them within church life because I think within church life those two groups of people often exist and they're often in conflict with each other one group might view the other as too highly focused not inclusive enough in policy and practice not very pastoral and perhaps even a bit theologically bigoted the other group might view the first group as a bit rubbery theologically too inclusive not focused enough and perhaps even a bit theologically soft anyway

I'm not saying that's actually taught here I'm just saying it is an observation I find quite interesting I'm just saying that the disagreements here are not ones that are alien to us as contemporary Christians I experience them within church life here and I experience them when I'm in ministry amongst I have experienced them from the other side when I'm in ministry amongst students and I wonder whether one way ahead is to allow both to get on with the task that happens here in the end two mission teams are formed here aren't they and both get on with the work perhaps in a different way and there's nothing wrong with that I think you see but I think we often want to have these we will put people on the edge and we'll cast people out or reject people as being part of what we're involved in anyway here what happens they both get on with the task and in the end

[16:17] I guess more people come to know the Lord Jesus through the two of them my second reflection on these verses is that they reflect the reality of Christian relationships don't they you see these two men have and would continue to stand side by side with each other in terms of gospel truth wouldn't they we have no hint here that there's any doctrinal issue that is under negotiation it is just a practical and relational matter that is going on friends that is the reality isn't it of Christian relationships it is the one I experience all the time as a minister of the gospel it is one that all who wish to serve Christ will encounter we are not talking here about doctrinal or gospel issues no we are talking about something entirely different from that we are talking about a dispute between two men and we are talking about how they resolve that that dispute now we're talking about differences that are important to us but do not impinge upon the gospel itself sometimes you see we can put these differences aside can't we at other times those differences are so deep that we cannot work together even though we respect each other and even though our core beliefs are the same that's okay friends in fact sometimes it might even result in gospel growth don't think disagreement is always bad amongst Christians you see there's a disposition in us that says

Christians cannot disagree no sometimes Christian disagreement can result in distinctive and creative witness and ministry friends we are human we have different styles and interests we have different personalities such matters are not theological they are personal but they may result in us respecting others but not being able to work with them so please hear me not all differences between Christians are theological some are very significant but not theological now let's move on look at chapter verse 1 of chapter 16 it follows on from the previous verses particularly 36 and 40 of the previous chapter and Paul and Silas you see in our revisiting churches that Paul went to with Barnabas in their first missionary journey and the passage forms a bridge between their first missionary journey and the council at Jerusalem and the second missionary journey but verse 1 is special for a number of reasons have a look at it you see when Paul and

Silas come to Lystra they meet a particular disciple and his name is Timothy and Timothy poses a particular problem that highlights the difficulties that have been going on since God gave Gentiles access into Christian faith you see Timothy encapsulates it in a person because he is of a mixed marriage his mother Eunice who's mentioned in 1 Timothy chapter 1 verse 5 is a Jewish believer his father is Greek that probably implies that his father is neither Jew nor believer so you've got quite a combination there in his parents haven't you but there is more to Timothy he is commended by the Christians at Lystra and Iconium and in verse 3 we're told that Paul wants to take

Timothy with him on his missionary journey now think about what's going on here and you think about what the problems might be with this this would create some very special problems wouldn't it you see we know from Paul's letters that Christians are not under the law there is no reason therefore why Timothy should be circumcised absolutely none at all well not really under law there's not one but there are relational issues at stake and that's indicated by verse 3 you see which talks about the knowledge of local Jews you see the people in this area the Jews in this area they know that Timothy has a Jewish mother and it's a bit hard to tell how whether you know Jewishness flowed was understood to flow through mothers through the women at this time but as every inclination that it probably did and in all likelihood because he was the uncircumcised son of a mixed marriage marriage he would have been viewed as technically a Jew and an apostate Jew therefore taking on

Timothy as a colleague imagine it Paul the ex-Pharisee the now Christian takes on within his team young Timothy apostate Jew it might even be read as him a Jew supporting such but what if Timothy a free Christian man free from the law voluntarily submitted himself to circumcision what would that do to this whole scenario well he would be rejecting the apostasy he would also be expressing that being a Jew and being a Christian were not inconsistent and he would be doing what Paul later advocated that is becoming like a Jew in order to win the Jews or at least not to disaffect the Jews he's an entirely different case to Titus remember Titus who was not compelled to be circumcised well Titus was a Gentile it's a very different case

[22 : 12] Timothy is classed a Jew what's more such an act done at the very hands of Paul would indicate what?

that he's pursuing the very sensitivities that were being addressed and promulgated through the council in Jerusalem and that he was bearing to these churches anyway with Timothy in their company they journey on and they delivered the decision made by the council and what's the end result look at verse 5 the churches are strengthened in the faith and they increase in numbers daily now let's turn to the last section of our passage look at chapter 16 verses 6 to 10 and while you do compare the two maps you might have those two maps there in front of you on the left hand side of the inside of your little outline look at the second one it shows the second missionary journey and compare it with the first one I hope you can see it because it's not as bold as I would like it to be now look at verse 6 Paul and his company go back to Paul's previous haunts the region of Phrygia and Galatia the logical next step you see

I think if you're heading that way would be to head into Asia but look at the second half of verse 6 we're told that they go to Phrygia and Asia because they've actually been forbidden by the Holy Spirit from speaking the word in Asia now I don't know about you but that the Holy Spirit should prevent the preaching of the gospel is amazing isn't it that the Holy Spirit should prevent the preaching of the gospel where Christ is not known is absolutely astounding yet that is what the text says no reason given we're not led into the mind of God the Holy Spirit to know why this is we're not even no explanation is given as to how the Spirit made that view known or how he prevented them none at all it's all just left for us to speculate no idea we just know that God was doing it through his Holy Spirit anyway having been prevented they think well let's head off to Bithynia look at the second half of verse 7 we're told that the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them why is the Spirit called the Spirit of Jesus well possibly to indicate that the Spirit's action here comes from the

Lord Jesus himself directing the progress of the gospel anyway whatever happened whatever the reason they're stymied from preaching the gospel in a particular place by the Spirit of Jesus himself the one whom the gospel gives glory to and wants to direct people toward the role of the Spirit is to uphold to glorify Jesus and yet the Spirit here is stopping him being proclaimed and therefore in one sense stopping the glory that might come from people being converted anyway they end up in Troas having been stopped twice and it looks like something of a dead end here they are by the sea stopped prohibited by God from going into places which might be fertile they thought for gospel preaching now I want you to notice something just before we move on look at verse 10 and listen and see if you can spot what is strange about it verse 10 it's something we haven't heard before in Acts let me read it to you 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 did you notice the difference up until now it's been third person hasn't it now it's second it's we okay it's us what's happened here well the us probably indicates the person who's writing

Acts Luke Luke's now with them so can you hear it the we the us a new person's joined the team it sounds as though it's the author of the book of Acts Luke but let's now go back to verse 9 the spirit forbade them to speak the word in Asia the spirit of Jesus didn't allow them to go into Bithynia but now God intervenes in another way this time we do know how he expresses himself it's in a vision to Paul look at verse 9 a man of Macedonia was standing there urging him and saying come over to Macedonia and help us in the Old Testament a call for help is often a cry to save so when Israel groans out to God in the book of Exodus it is a call to save us which is what God does so God is clearly guiding the group by two sorts of things isn't he by prohibition don't go there and by direction come here and so they conclude the obvious I reckon you can't go anywhere up there and you're being called over here we ought to head off in that direction

[27 : 34] God is calling them to preach not in other places but in Macedonia so they head off friends I wonder if we can now step back a bit and do some broad reflections first I want to reflect a little bit on the spirit's role in Acts and particularly on what we see in Acts 15 and 16 you see the book of Acts highlights the work of the Holy Spirit doesn't it I mean even the first few verses of Acts emphasize this we see the gift of the spirit we see the spirit talked about we see the gift of the spirit given in Acts 2 and whenever key groups are converted the spirit is there endorsing their conversion and testifying to it by causing them to speak we see the spirit's work in empowering of people to speak the great news of Jesus and our normal reaction when we hear about the spirit's work is to think of the supernatural isn't it when we hear of the spirit being at work we by default think something supernatural and we think of some supernatural divine intervention that stops people in their tracks somehow and those things do happen in

Acts you can see them but I want you to look at three references that occur in Acts 15 and 16 so have a look at them in your Bibles Acts 15 28 the context is the letter from the council to the church at Antioch it is a description of what the meeting decided and it's prefaced with these words it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements now I don't know about you but I find that verse quite striking you see when we use the language of the Holy Spirit did this or the Holy Spirit did that or the Holy Spirit told me this or that we generally mean that something almost magical happened don't we that's the way it's used in common parlance in other words something spiritual happened something unusual perhaps even a little spooky in some way but what happened in Jerusalem is they had a debate a theological debate they compared scriptures with each other listened to each other heard from the scriptures reasoned together and then they concluded and when they did it they said and it seemed good to the Holy

Spirit and to us that is as the result of a debate the Holy Spirit's at work friends the Holy Spirit does not just do really out there things he clearly also works through the ordinary things of life through humans interacting through circumstances through debates through meditation on scripture through sharing scripture with each other through interpreting scripture through guidance in interpreting scripture and so it's possible that without any really spectacular events taking place we could say it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to me or it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us but now let's turn to chapter 16 verses 6 to 10 see one of the strange things is that we are not specifically told how the Holy Spirit does things here I already said that but we and I think many commentators assume that the Spirit must have done things spectacularly don't we we assume somehow that some prophet must have got up somewhere and said something or you know that some light happened in the sky that said you know don't go to Bithynia

Holy Spirit signature do you know what I'm saying we sort of assume something spectacular happened but when we've read chapter 15 we might open ourselves up to some alternate possibilities I take it that all that is being said is that somehow some unspecified how God's Spirit was at work somehow directing Paul and his companions to Troas prohibiting Asia prohibiting Bithynia and then at Troas we don't hear the Spirit being mentioned at all and yet we hear of a vision that has to be interpreted and decided upon so friends I take it that the Spirit might have prevented and guided by ordinary or spectacular means in terms of his prevention does that make sense it may have been a circumstance an ordinary decision made an illness amongst the team some governmental action some prophetic declaration some natural disaster who knows it could be any other means that the

Holy Spirit chose to be at work we are not told what it was some might be spectacular but some might be mundane ordinary as we've already seen in Acts chapter 15 but the conclusion was the same that it was the Holy Spirit's work he was responsible however he did it he was responsible and people knew that to be the case through people's circumstances interventions and the like he is directing and forwarding the gospel of the Son of God having said that let me return to the issue of guidance now as I read through the scriptures I find that the spectacular is actually reasonably scarce just just in your minds start at Genesis and think through when the miraculous occurs if you do this you'll actually find it's reasonably rare there are periods of spectacular interventions aren't they aren't there you just think of the time of the

[33 : 43] Exodus is one isn't it those plagues they look like something spectacular to me the ministry of Elijah and Elisha where the miraculous occur often and almost seem like ordinary the ministry of Jesus the ministry of the apostles in Acts but for most of biblical narrative the spectacular is noticeably absent but what is present in fact if I might say this in the story of Israel the text often has God noticeably absent you can search for him and he's hardly mentioned one book never mentions him at all you might know which one that is book of Esther you don't even mention that God's there clearly he's working behind the scenes but you don't actually talk about him and yet it is clear that he's not absent in these places in the in-between times when the spectacular does not occur when the miraculous does not occur it's not as though he's not absent that he's absent he's very present he's at work through the ordinary decisions of humans who are seeking to obey God and give him glory if we take scripture as a whole

I think the overall picture is clear our goal is to bring the gospel of Jesus to all that we can our goal as Christians is to live in obedience to God which will give glory to Jesus and for this task we are given scripture to guide us and sound converted minds renewed by the gospel we are given the Holy Spirit to help us as we think upon scripture and reflect upon it oh it may be that God in his mercy might intervene in some spectacular ways every now and then but in my own life they've been relatively scarce or he may not intervene at all in a spectacular fashion but that does not mean that our God is absent nor does it mean that his Holy Spirit is not active you see what is the default position for

Christians it is to act wisely and obediently informed by God through the scriptures in the light of his spirit's work and let him oversee our decisions and to be open to his intervention in whatever way it comes and each one of us here will have seen God working at different ways at different times and they are all his work not just the ones where they happen spectacularly so friends I hope just a little passing bit at the end there to talk about guidance because I think we are quite confused about it and I hope this helps a little if you're looking for something to read I found a really simple book about two or three years ago written by a fairly sane person on this topic it's called just do something a liberating approach to finding God's will so just if that is an issue for you there would be a good place to start and look at that it's brilliant it's not very long okay so worth looking at it's sane and sensible let's pray our father thank you for your work through your spirit thank you for your spirit glorifying your son thank you for the way that we've seen him at work in this passage today pushing your apostle to the gentiles pushing him to a location where he might go to

Macedonia directing him father we pray for ourselves that we might be committed to the gospel of your son and look for all opportunities to proclaim him and that your spirit might be at work in whatever way is necessary to make that happen our father we pray these things in Jesus name amen