CALLED TO PREACH THE GOSPEL

Acts 15:36-16:40
Key Verse: 16:9

"During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'"

In last week's passage, we studied how the enemies of God sought to deny the power of Jesus' cross by insisting that Gentiles be circumcised according to the law of Moses. They implied that salvation is only for the Jews. But God's servants Paul, Peter and James defended the gospel of Jesus Christ. These men humbled their Jewish pride to see that God himself had made a way through his Son Jesus for all people to be saved. In Jesus Christ, Jews and Gentiles are equal, the same sinners in need of his saving grace. We must know and believe that Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection are sufficient to make every man right before God. In today's passage, we will study the first half of Paul's second missionary journey. We learn that Paul was the spiritual general who led the Christian advance into the heart of the Roman empire. However, we also learn that Paul had many coworkers in doing God's work. Most importantly, we learn that the Holy Spirit was with Paul and gave him the victory when he served God by faith. In fact, God's work is done when Christians receive God's grace as God's calling for service in doing God's world salvation work.

I. Call to Macedonia (15:36-16:10)

First, prayer for Mark. After the courageous decision of the Jerusalem council to treat Gentiles as the same human beings for the sake of the gospel, Paul and Barnabas wanted to go out among the Gentile churches they had visited on their first missionary journey. Look at verse 36. "Some time later, Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.'" In doing God's work, Paul and Barnabas were so joyful and full of energy. It was because they loved God, and loved God's flock of sheep under their care. However, an obstacle rose up between them over Barnabas' cousin, John Mark. On the first missionary journey, Mark had accompanied them to the island of Cyprus, where
Mark witnessed the great work of God going on through Paul and Barnabas. But missionary work was a time of intense spiritual fighting against the agents of Satan who wanted to deceive and mislead young and hungry sheep. Mark was overwhelmed from the spiritual fighting, and left the others to return home to his Mommy in Jerusalem. Mark was obviously a capable and earnest young man. Barnabas wanted to encourage him in his faith and help him to use his talents in God. So he strongly insisted that Mark join them on their second journey. Paul, however, did not think it wise. Look at verse 38. "...but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work." Barnabas loved his cousin Mark, and wanted to help him as best he could. But Paul saw that Mark had a spiritual problem. Even though he was talented and able, and had a heart’s desire to serve God, he did not know the faithfulness of God. When confronted with intense spiritual fighting, he deserted the others and ran home. Not knowing the faithfulness of God is not knowing God, for God’s essential character as God is faithfulness. 2 Timothy 2:13 says, “If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.” Paul loved Barnabas. Paul prayed for John Mark. But Paul insisted that Mark should not come with them. As a result, they split up, with Barnabas taking Mark and going to Cyprus, while Paul chose Silas and left for Syria and Cilicia.

Here we learn that in doing God’s work, faithfulness is most important. Many people want to serve God from their talent and human ability. But we must know that talent or ability is only potential for serving God. That potential cannot be realized until we know the faithfulness of God. Mark was certainly an able person, who later wrote Mark’s gospel, emphasizing the servantship of Jesus Christ. But Mark’s unstable character made him a burden to Paul in doing God’s work. When Paul called on the authority of the Holy Spirit to rebuke the false prophet Elymas, Mark was shaking in his boots and ready to run. When Paul challenged Mark to serve his holy mission with absolute faith, Mark’s face twisted up like a lemon because of his fear and doubt. But after Paul’s clear stand on the criterion for serving world mission, Mark struggled with himself before God. He learned from Peter in Jerusalem that he must make every effort to add to his faith perseverance... (2 Pe 1:5). He became a valued coworker, first to Peter, and later even to Paul when he was in prison. Later, he wrote in Mark’s gospel, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his
life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). We need to learn an absolute attitude like Paul in doing God’s work. May God help us like St. Mark to make every effort to grow in the faithfulness of God until we can use all of our talents and abilities for the glory of God.

Second, A disciple named Timothy. Paul and his companions traveled overland to Derbe and then Lystra, where Paul had been stoned nearly to death. Some of the brothers brought Paul’s attention to a young man named Timothy, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. Timothy in character was a little fearful and timid. But Timothy’s greatness was his selflessness in serving others (Php 2:20). So Paul wanted to take him along with them on the journey. From Paul’s choosing of Timothy, we can learn several things.

Firstly, Paul’s heart for one disciple. Paul was the spiritual general responsible for the evangelization of the Roman empire. He had no time to deal with a teenage pupil who still depended on his mommy for everything. But Paul saw the greatness of God in Timothy. Paul wanted to help Timothy grow in his faith, the faith that had been handed down to him from his mother Eunice and his grandmother, Lois. Paul was a great evangelist. But his greatest work was his discipleship training of young believers, one by one. UBF learned the principle of one to one Bible study by examining carefully the discipleship training of Jesus and of Paul. We must pray for the whole world as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But we must see the harvest of many in the growth of one disciple under our care, like Timothy under St. Paul.

Secondly, Paul’s heart for the new churches in Galatia. On his first missionary journey, Paul had spent no more than several months at each of the cities they visited. This was now his second journey to them. Paul, who had been a Christian for nearly 20 years, could have looked down at these new churches as too immature. He could have emphasized their need to grow, to provide services and amenities for their members, such as a day care center, weight training rooms and volley ball courts. But Paul went there looking for spiritual fruit. And he helped the new churches bear spiritual fruit by calling Timothy as a coworker with him in doing world evangelization work. Here we see that Paul made no distinction between the grace of salvation and the grace of God’s calling to his world salvation purpose. Those who received the marvelous grace of Jesus, the forgiveness of sins from his shed blood,
and the living hope of the kingdom of God through his resurrection, were also called to share his grace with the whole world as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. WIU is a new church, and we are small. But we are absolutely obligated to participate in God's world salvation work going on in Russia, Bolivia and in the Islamic countries of the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

Thirdly, Paul's heart for world mission. Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 9:37-38, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the Harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Paul knew the heart of God for world salvation. Paul knew that the problems of the world were not economical, political or social; the problem of the world was there are not enough shepherds. Paul wanted to raise Timothy as a shepherd for the world, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

In order to take Timothy along, Paul first circumcised Timothy. It was for the sake of the Jews of that area, who knew that Timothy's father was a Greek, and therefore would be offended if Paul brought Timothy into the Jewish synagogues in order to preach the gospel. From this, we can learn Paul's principle for doing world salvation work. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews, I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.... I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." The principle of gospel work is not to make others like we are, but to become like others in order to win them over to God. What a beautiful principle of world conquest! To humble ourselves enough to see even one other person as God sees them is a life or death struggle with our ego. But as gospel workers, we must learn to see Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and even secular humanists with God’s shepherd heart that leaves the 99 sheep in the open country to save the one lost sheep. In the record books, America had the most missionaries sent out in the past year. But the truth is that they were never missionaries. They were mostly Americans who remained Americans on vacation in foreign lands. The world mission principle is the same as the principle of the kernel of wheat. The world mission principle is the principle that we cannot give life to others unless we die to ourselves.
Third, the man of Macedonia. Paul and his companions traveled throughout Phrygia and Galatia, delivering the message of salvation by grace to all the churches where they had been before, and preaching the gospel message in many new towns. Paul's plan, evidently, was to carry the gospel in ever-widening circles out from Antioch. But he and his companions confronted an unexpected obstacle in proclaiming the gospel in the province of Asia. Look at verse 7. "When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to." The author Luke emphasizes in verses 6 and 7 that the Holy Spirit would not let Paul and his companions go on into Asia to preach the gospel there. Perhaps they tried to enter Mysia by several different routes, but each time, they were stopped. Paul was a man of mission, so he just pressed forward on to Troas, but he must have been confused that the Spirit of Jesus had hindered him from preaching the gospel according to his plan. While at Troas, however, Jesus made his own plan clear to Paul. Look at verse 9. "During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" God was concerned with the spiritual suffering of those living in Macedonia under the power of sin and death. They were hungry and desperate, like beggars in their spiritual poverty. God had his own plan and strategy to complete his world salvation purpose. According to his own purpose, he redirected world mission work out of Asia and into Europe. Later, he would move the center of his church from Antioch to Rome. Next, to England. And finally, to the USA. Here we learn an important lesson. As God's chosen people, we are called to share in God's heart for world salvation. But we have no wisdom how to carry out God's world salvation purpose. We must study God's word, and also learn from God's work in history, until we can see God's strategy and plan for carrying out world mission work.

We must hear the Macedonian call that God has made to each of us, which are our marching orders in doing God's work in our generation. When Paul and his companions heard of Paul's vision, they concluded that God had called them to cross over the Aegean sea into Macedonia and preach the gospel to the Macedonians. They were ready-go foot soldiers who left at a moment's notice when they received God's call.

II. Paul's mission in Phillipi

First, Lydia's conversion. They set sail from Troas and sailed first to Samothrace and then to Neapolis. From there, they traveled on foot to
Phillipi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. There were not enough Jews in Philippi to have a synagogue. So, on the Sabbath Paul's mission team went outside the city gate to the river, where they expected to find a place of prayer. They sat down to speak with the handful of women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a business woman from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and her household were baptized, she invited them to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." In this way God provided room and board for them as they stayed in Philippi. When Lydia believed, she made a clear confession of her faith and commitment to follow Jesus through baptism. More importantly, Lydia made no distinction between God's grace of forgiveness for her, and God's calling to her as a servant of world salvation work. Immediately, Lydia opened up her home to become the home base for gospel work in Philippi. Lydia's house became the house church of Philippi, Paul's first European church and one of the most faithful churches. From this church Paul received financial support while pioneering the churches of Macedonia and Achaia. (Php 4:16) Here we remember Paul's own confession in Romans 1:5, "Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith." Not only Paul, but all believers who know the grace of God are called to participate in the great world salvation work of God. We learn from Lydia that we can do so by making our homes and our hearts spiritual house churches for doing gospel work around us.

Second, Paul and Silas sang in prison (16-40). Once when Paul's mission team was going to the place of prayer, they were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners. She nagged Paul and his companions for many days. Finally, Paul drove out the spirit in the name of Jesus. She was free from the spirit which had enslaved her mind and her loud mouth. What a great work of God! But then her owners realized that their income source was gone. They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. Paul and Silas were stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and their feet fastened in stocks (16-24).
About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. They had to be sorry for their broken noses and bloodly lips. But they prayed and sang out of thanksgiving to God, who was with them even in prison.

Be still, my soul; the Lord is on thy side
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain
Leave to thy God to order and provide
In every change He faithful will remain
Be still, my soul; thy best, thy heavenly friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end,

and the other prisoners were listening. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword to commit suicide. Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" Then the jailer exclaimed, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household" (25-31). We note several things here. Where there was a work of God, there was a hindrance of Satan. We also see the powerful spirit of Paul and Silas; in jail they could pray and sing, while the other prisoners were groaning. Also, they were ready to preach the gospel even to the jailer, despite their physical wounds. When the Spirit of Jesus was with them, they were victorious. 2 Corinthians 3:17 says, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." May God give us grace to be free like Paul and Silas to serve God's purpose in any circumstance.

In this passage we learn that God has called his people to serve his world salvation purpose. Those who live by faith in the grace of Jesus Christ are also enabled by his grace to serve this holy mission with a spirit of power and victory. Our nation faces a terrible challenge in the days ahead. But our fight as Christians is not with Afghan rebels, whom we used to call Freedom fighters. Our fight is to hear God's Macedonian call for Christians to embrace Muslims with the love of God, and offer them a way out of their guilty consciences and the burden of their sins that is by grace, and is complete and everlasting. May God's spirit and grace be with you all.