

WHAT THE BIBLE IS ALL ABOUT--

## **Our Mission - There's A Strategic Plan In There Somewhere!**

Acts 16:6-10

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When I attended the Baptist World Congress in South Africa this summer, it was refreshing to experience scripture read in Spanish, Norwegian, South African, Swahili, Portuguese, French, Russian, Japanese, Korean and, oh, yes, English, too! The Gospel truly is international. The Book of Acts reminds us that the church has always been international. Let me show you what I mean. During this sermon series, "What The Bible Is All About," we've found it helpful to ground our overview in history, with a sort of timeline. Jesus was born in 4 BC. His public ministry, death and resurrection occurred around 26-30 AD. The events in the Book of Acts cover the time 30-65 AD. And Paul's conversion (around 34 AD) and travels and letters (New Testament epistles) took place 48-65 AD. These letters are called "epistles" and are written to churches, most of which are described in Acts. (A Bible professor told me once that one student, answering a test question: "What is an epistle?" replied, "The wife of an apostle." Not quite!

In the first twelve chapters of Acts (covering roughly 10-15 years), Peter is the primary focus. But beginning in Acts 13, Paul is the central character. In fact, our text this morning is the beginning of what is called Paul's second missionary journey.

Now we could talk all day about what IS in Acts, but we also notice what IS NOT here. Luke (who wrote Acts) is not very interested in church organization and structure [Fee and Stuart, *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*, p. 113]. In fact, all of us "J's" on the Myers-Briggs Personality Test get really frustrated with Acts! Where's the structure? Where's the plan? We think that before Paul took off on a missionary journey, he should have called leaders together and done a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats). I mean, do you see a strategic plan in Acts 16:6-10?

Looking at a Bible map, you can see that route Paul took. Listen to v. 6: "being forbidden by the Holy Spirit..." And v. 7: "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them..." After several failed attempts to find God's direction, suddenly, when they were NOT trying, but sleeping, God spoke (vv. 9-10). God has a sense of humor, right? When we try too hard, God is silent. When we are helpless, God comes. And I love the wording Eugene Peterson gives this in *The Message*: "The dream gave Paul his map. All the pieces had come together." We want to flip that around: I draw this map and then ask God to bless it and give me a dream to carry it out. No, the dream gives us the map.

When you look at all of Paul's missionary journeys, you see that this episode in Acts 16 isn't the exception; it's the rule. God's plans don't look like ours. All through Acts, the missionary

journeys look like the tracks of a drunken squirrel, and yet, somewhere in there is God's strategic plan, not ours!

And we shouldn't be surprised at this story. We've seen how this plays out in our own mission endeavors. We had planned to partner with a church Pervomaisk, Ukraine (near the Russian border). But then war broke out there and the church was burned by separatists. So now, the pastor, Elisey, is teaching at the seminary in Lviv and starting a new church! We tried this, but the God said that. Our plans...God's plans.

How about in our church? Is God's will a straight line? How about in your own life? Is God's will seen better in prospect or in retrospect? Does God's plan unfold sequentially, logically? Not really. I've thought a great deal about this scripture and the entire Book of Acts, and here are some suggestions about God's will (for our church or for us individually):

1. We are free to fail (they tried several things in vv. 6-7 which did not work).
2. We are more likely to discover God's will by going and doing than by sitting and waiting. I was at a conference center not long ago and came up to the escalator. "Oh no," I thought, "it's not in operation." Then I realized: It doesn't move until we get on it. Likewise, God's will.
3. Sanctified common sense works! I love v. 10 in the old KJV: "assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us...to preach...unto them." Nothing else worked. So, we used our common sense. Sometimes, God's will isn't that complicated. Do what makes sense!
4. When one door closes, another is opening.
5. When we obey God, we discover God is already there, waiting for us. Paul and the others crossed over into Europe (vv. 11ff) and a new church, the Philippian Church, was born.

So here it is. We don't have to know everything before we follow Christ. We don't have to know the whole plan in order to live for Christ or to be successful. All we have to do is trust and obey. Remember, Jesus didn't say, "Here's a map. Here's my strategic plan." He said, "I am the way." Oh, and he also said, "Follow me."