

“Discerning God’s Voice Through the Unexpected”

Based on Acts 15: 36; 40-41 and Acts 16:1-15.

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Help, Thanks, Wow. That’s the title of a book written by Anne Lamotte. In it she suggests that these three words form the basis for most of the prayers we need to pray as we go through life. Although I would say that “Sorry” is missing from her list, this writer has captured something that is true about the reasons and ways we connect with the God who created us and who redeems us.

Of these three, HELP seeks a response. It almost compels a response. We read over and over in Scripture of people desperately crying to God for HELP. Think of Moses when overwhelmed with the burden of leading people in a wilderness, Hannah weeping as she cried out to God for a child, David in the Psalms seeking God’s help, Daniel and his friends pleading for God’s mercy when the king made unreasonable demands of them. God does not simply hear these calls as information: he acts. He dispatches HELP through a way of safety, and through renewed strength and assurance.

God’s character is imprinted on parents, who are instantly mobilized when they hear their child calling out for help. Whatever they are doing is dropped, and they hurry to the aid of their little one, without thinking to ask if it’s urgent. How much more so for followers of Jesus, attuned to helping those in trouble with gospel shaped listening and speaking, with gospel shaped practical care and words of hope.

As I read today’s passage, I invite you to listen for the word help. Who is asking for help? Who is responding? How does God facilitate this help?

Reading from Acts 15: 36; 40-16:15

After the Council or Synod of Jerusalem as Pastor Carel shared two weeks ago, Paul and some other brothers personally delivered its decision to the church in Antioch. As you may remember, this decision was a compromise that did not overburden the new Gentile believers with the rituals and laws of Judaism. At the same time, it asked Gentile believers to respect a minimum of Jewish laws so as not to give offense to their fellow believers who were Jewish.

Now, Paul expresses a desire to go back to the churches that he and Barnabas had started and see how they are doing. In the verses I skipped over, there's a jarring rift between Barnabas and Paul, so Paul and Silas are the ones traveling together. They take the same letter with them, since these fellowships were also bringing together insider Jews and outsider Gentiles to form one new people all serving Jesus. You may remember that Paul's custom in every town he visited was to first go to the Jewish synagogue and speak with the Jewish men who had gathered there.

As they revisit these towns that lie in the centre of what is today called Turkiye, their team expands. Timothy, who likely came to faith along with his mother when Paul had first come to his city,¹ is invited to join Paul and Silas. Timothy represents two cultures: his father had been Greek and his mother was Jewish. To respect Timothy's Jewish background that passes through the mother, Paul ensures he undergoes the Jewish ritual of circumcision. It may seem illogical to us under the terms of the decision at Jerusalem since Timothy was also partly Gentile, but that's a sermon for another day.

Since Paul and Silas have circled back to all the churches they had started, the original intent of this mission tour has been completed. Nevertheless, Paul and his team venture West and to the reader's surprise they are "kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia." Asia is the western province within the larger Asia Minor, so it's a sensible step to continue sharing the message there. We don't know if this guidance came through a vision, a voice, an inner sense, conflict, circumstances, or some combination of these. Regardless, it was abundantly clear that the **Spirit** was blocking the way.

Next, they try North because there is another province with potential. But, "the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to" cross this border either. Again, we don't know exactly how the Spirit of Jesus communicated to them. We can imagine the group of three wondering and asking, "Well, where do we go now?" As if herded from both sides by a proverbial sheepdog, they end up in the port of Troas.

¹ Willie James Jennings (2017) *Acts*, p. 160.

I'd like to share a quote from Joel Green of Fuller Seminary, "Part of discernment is taking steps and maybe we only know one step to take or two, but we take steps. And it's in the context of stepping, as it were, that we see that we've made the wrong step or that there are other steps to take."² A key part of the stepping is the relationship we have with God, as was highlighted by Pastor Toyosi three weeks ago. In this relationship, we trust God to guide us because He knows the big picture that we cannot see and He has our best interest in mind.

Having taken the steps to Troas, Paul receives the vision by night. Though few words are used to describe it, we can picture its simplicity and raw emotion. It's a man in desperation begging for help. God has put words in this man's mouth: "Come over to Macedonia and HELP us."

The vision was clear. The province was named. The destination was on the other side of the North Aegean Sea. I can't help but wonder, though, how they felt about going to Macedonia. This was the land of Alexander the Great, a conqueror who had brought pagan Greek culture to every corner of the known world about 300 years earlier. And for the past 200 years, Macedonia had been under Roman control.

Another notable thing about Macedonia is that it was not listed in the nationalities represented in Jerusalem at Pentecost. This map, which was shown when Pastor Joyce was with us, does not have any arrows coming from the yellow province with three finger-like peninsulas. Whether that meant there were none or too few to mention, we are not sure. Either way, there were no churches in Macedonia that the apostles knew of.

Did you notice the subtle change in this story, where it had been told as "they" and now it's "we"? This alerts us that the mission team has expanded again. Not just from three to four, but it's now become more diverse with Doctor Luke, a Gentile, who seems to have joined them in Troas. He continues to tell us what happened as an eyewitness.

As mentioned before, a call for HELP compels a response. Will they take it seriously? Will they drop what they are doing and hurry to respond? Next, we read, "After Paul had

² <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/joel-green-on-discernment/> 19 Feb 2018.

seen the vision, we got ready at once, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.” The door is open, and they don’t delay in crossing the threshold. As one of my former pastors in Bowmanville was fond of saying, “Delayed obedience is no obedience at all.” Travelling by ship, Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke rest one night on an island part-way. The conditions appear to be favourable, because another New Testament account has the same trip taking five days.³ This door is wide open.

If going to the unexpected destination of Macedonia province may have felt unsettling for the brothers, going sixteen kilometres inland to the particular city of Philippi certainly would have been. It’s true that all the areas they had visited so far had been under Roman rule. But this one also has a large Roman **population**, including army veterans.⁴ Roman culture was everywhere. One commentator suggested that Jewish prejudice against the Romans was even stronger than against the Greeks. It’s worth remembering that Gentiles were not all of one type, and the customs of Rome had elements that highly offended Jewish people (and vice versa).⁵ Spreading the gospel to the Gentiles did not require crossing just one cultural barrier but many!

Paul’s rhythm of offering HELP by locating any Jewish men in Philippi’s synagogue on the Sabbath is disrupted. Where we expect to read “synagogue,” we find “place of prayer.” Where we expect to find men, we find only women. Where we expect to find Jews, the only person identified is clearly a Gentile.

What is happening here? Who were the missionaries supposed to “HELP”?

It has been Lydia’s custom, it would seem, to gather weekly with other women for an informal prayer service in a simple building outside the city. Luke shares three interesting things about this woman. She had been born in the city of Thyatira, on the other side of the sea they had just crossed. In fact, Thyatira is in one of the provinces where the Spirit would not allow the missionaries to go! Next, she is involved in the textile industry, specifically with purple cloth. Jewish readers would hear in this description an echo of the Proverbs 31

³ Justo L. Gonzalez (2001) *Acts: the Gospel of the Holy Spirit*, p. 188

⁴ David E. Garland (2017) *Acts: Teach the Text Commentary*, p. 162

⁵ Mathew Henry (1721) *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 2134

woman. Lydia is a woman of noble character; what's more, she is a "worshipper of God." This expression was used for Gentiles who joined Jews for worship but had not undergone all the ceremonies to be considered full converts.

Regardless of the unexpected situation, the four guests "sat down" and taught the women just as would have been customary with a group of men. The Spirit had led them this far, and they were obedient to the call of offering "HELP," gospel-shaped help to those already seeking the God of Israel.

We don't read the content of their sermon here, but we could expect it to have been similar to other recorded sermons of Peter or Paul. Starting with the shared background knowledge of God's mighty acts and promises from the Old Testament, they would show that Jesus was indeed the fulfillment of all their hopes and desires. Jesus is the HELP they desperately need.

It should not surprise us that Lydia is receptive. She is listening and responsive to Paul's message. As NT Wright puts it, they were "tapping at a window that was already open."⁶ This was a divine appointment. The work of the Holy Spirit in those who are called is summarized in a 400 year old document from the Synod of Dordt, and I quote: "God not only sees to it that the gospel is proclaimed to them outwardly, and enlightens their minds powerfully by the Holy Spirit so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God, but, by the effective operation of the same regenerating Spirit, God also penetrates into the inmost being, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart..."⁷ These words on a page attempt to capture the amazing work of God's grace seen in Lydia's life and in our own.

When we read that Lydia and her household are baptized, we do not need to conclude that this all happened on the same day. The writer of Acts summarizes things that happened over days or weeks into a sentence or two. But it is fair to ask, why does Luke

⁶ NT Wright (2008), *Acts for Everyone, Part 2*. Westminster Knox Press, p. 63.

⁷ *Canons of Dordt* (1619), Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine, article 11.

provide us with this amount of detail about one person and one place when other people and places on Paul's journey get barely a mention?

Let me share two possible reasons. Lydia could be understood as the female counterpart of Cornelius. Let me back up. Earlier, in Acts 10, God appeared to Peter in a vision of birds, reptiles, and four-footed animals. All of these were considered unclean by Jewish dietary laws, yet God forcefully told Peter, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15). This truth was applied almost instantly when Peter agreed to visit the home of a Roman soldier and shared the gospel message with his entire clan. The hearts of Cornelius and his household were prepared, and they responded with obedience and were baptized.

In today's story, a vision is also used to enable Paul and his companions to expand the frontiers of who will hear the Gospel. Lydia and her household are also receptive to the message and are baptized. Like Cornelius, she hosts the missionaries in her own home for the duration of their stay in the city.

The second reason is to show the progress of the gospel as outlined by Jesus Himself, right before he returned to heaven. He had said: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Luke is demonstrating in the story of Cornelius and now in the story of Lydia that the apostles are doing precisely this. Eric Barreto says, "Unmistakably for Luke, this is the way upon which God plans the church to walk." He continues with an application: "We ought to follow God's call to reach across cultural and ethnic boundaries and learn to find opportunities to do God's work in unexpected places."⁸

You see, this open door to "HELP" outsiders has never closed. It meant that the Gospel spread far south to Ethiopia through Philip's encounter with a eunuch from the court of Queen Candace. It meant that it also went far southeast to India through the Apostle Thomas in early days. It also got into the blocked provinces of Asia and Bithynia by the time

⁸ Eric Barreto (May 9, 2010) *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-169-15-2>

Peter wrote his two letters. Fast forward to the year 700, the gospel came northwestward to the Frisians when Willibrord convinced them to stop worshiping images of the god Wodan. Fast forward again to the 19th and 20th centuries when the gospel began reaching inland areas of China through missionaries like Hudson Taylor and Gladys Aylward. And today, the nations have also come to Waterloo Region. Community CRC is currently facilitating and giving towards Gospel-shaped HELP in Estonia, at Ray of Hope dinners in downtown Kitchener, in Brazil, at local university campuses, in Guatemala, on Manitoulin Island, in Zambian orphanages, and beyond. God has called us to HELP in bringing His HELP to others.

Might the Spirit be herding you into a new pasture? How will you know? The art of spiritual discernment can take place on an individual, small group, or family level through a close relationship with God. You might have noticed that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus and God are individually mentioned as Paul and his friends are trying to figure out their next step. In the same way, we can experience daily nudges towards open doors. And sometimes there may be more dramatic changes in direction.

It seems obvious, but it was only Paul who had the vision of the man of Macedonia. It strikes me that there was a high level of trust between these disciples. When he shared the vision, they did not question its authenticity or explain it away as impractical, impossible or unbiblical. Their response was to trust Paul and to trust the vision, and they got ready “at once.” Getting four people to agree on a course of action, when they all come from different backgrounds and experiences is remarkable. When we try to do that with a group of 40 or 240, there has to be trust. Trust that the others are seeking the Lord’s will just as much as you are. Trust that God desires His people to work together even when they might have legitimate differences of opinion. Paul later wrote these words to the people of Philippi: “being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

One last note before I close with a current-day example of discernment in the life of someone I know.

This morning's reading did not include all of the events that happened later at Philippi, which included a night in prison, an earthquake, and a request to leave town. Spiritual discernment does not lead us to places where everything will be easy and comfortable. In fact, it's when things are uneasy and uncomfortable, that the direction we've received will assure us that God is with us. And that we're exactly where we are supposed to be.⁹

This story is shared with permission: A certain woman and her husband have been part of a discernment process for over 20 years. Before they were married, they briefly ministered at an orphanage in Central Asia and were convicted that adoption would be part of God's story for them. After getting married and having two biological children, they began the gruelling process of being accepted as potential adoptive parents. Several times, they were close to being matched with a child only for that child to be placed with another family.

These closed doors were very painful, and yet the sense of God's call to adopt remained strong. Every two years they had to renew their eligibility with updated paperwork, and the agency was always amazed at their endurance.

Through some challenges with the fixer-upper house they bought four years ago, this woman reflected that God had grown their capacity for disruption, stress and flexibility. So it was that a year ago the doors opened for them to HELP, welcome, and adopt children in need of a home.

She was honest about God's ongoing provision as well as the ways they have been stretched beyond what they could have imagined. Following God's call through an open door does not always come as quickly as the call to Macedonia, nor is it always comfortable and easy. And yet this woman testified of the sense of peace that has accompanied her in this ongoing journey. May the Lord help us apply His word to our own lives. And all God's people said, Amen.

⁹ Rev. Tom Van Milligen, personal communication in preparation for this message.