



The Sovereign Spirit

Acts 16:6-10

1. Closing the Door (verses 6-8)

2. Opening the Door (9-10)

One of the most helpful Proverbs for Christian living is found in Proverbs, chapter 16 and verse 9. Perhaps you know it?

Proverbs 16:9

The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.

That is, we think about our life and the decisions we face, and we plan our ways according to the best of our abilities. The LORD, then, directs our steps by guiding us along the way.

This little Proverb makes living the Christian life so freeing. Because, we don't have to verify that all of our choices in life are exactly what God wants for our lives. No, we see the wisdom of God, we seek out counselors, and then, we walk full ahead in confidence that the LORD will establish our steps in the way we should go. In other words, we don't have to worry about hitting some magical bullseye in making decisions in our life, thinking that if we missed it, we are out of the will of God, as if we went to the wrong college, or accepted the wrong job, or married the wrong person. No, you have planned your way, and the LORD has directed your steps.

Now, that's not to say that we can make bad decisions in our lives. We can. But if, we seek the LORD with all our hearts, And if we trust him for guidance, The promise of Proverbs 3:5-6 stands true:

Proverbs 3:5-6

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Well, this morning as we turn to the Scripture, we will see the LORD directing the paths of our missionary trio in their mission to reach the world for Christ. Our Scripture is found in Acts 16:6-10, which gives us an account of the early days of Paul's second missionary journey.

The journey started in Antioch, with Paul and Silas heading north, to "visit the brothers" (Acts 15:36) in Derbe and Lystra and Iconium and Antioch, places where Paul made disciples during his first missionary journey. Paul's intention in traveling to these cities was to "see how [the believers] were] doing" (Acts 15:36). That is, he was following up on the disciples. When Paul and Barnabas had gone through these regions, they "made many disciples" (Acts 14:21). Returning, they wanted to see, if indeed, they were continuing on!

I'm sure that they were encouraged. I'm sure that they were discouraged as well. They were discouraged by those who had not continued on their faith. There were some who had received the message that was preached, the gospel, the saving message of Jesus. they appeared, for all intents and purposes, to be genuine in their faith. But, like the seed that fell upon the rocky soil, they had no root. and when the tribulation came along (Matthew 13:21), they fell away. Paul had warned them of the tribulation that was coming. He was telling them, "through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Yet, they still fell away. Surely, there were those also, who fell away when the unbelieving Jews came and bullied them. Like the seed among the thorns that choked out the plants, so there were those who cared more for the world than they did for Jesus (Matthew 13:22).

But for all of their discouragement, they were also encouraged by those who had remained faithful to the Lord, who had faced the tribulations that Paul had warned about, and had continued on, trusting in their Savior!

The names of those who continued on are lost to us, but we know one name: Timothy. If you remember from last week, Paul and Silas encountered this young man in Lystra. Timothy had a good reputation among "the brothers at Lystra and Iconium." (Acts 16:3). I'm sure that Paul heard stories about the persecution that Timothy faced, and how he stayed true to the faith And Paul wanted Timothy to join them on the trip. And after he was circumcised to prevent an unnecessary offense to the Jews, he joined them on their way.

So, there were three on the missionary team as they left the cities in southern Galatia and headed off to Phrygia: Paul and Silas and Timothy. This is where we pick up our text: Acts 16:6-10. In these verses, we will see the "Sovereign Spirit" guiding these missionaries in their journey. Indeed, this is the title of my message this morning: "The Sovereign Spirit." As you read the text, I want for you to listen for how the Holy Spirit guides these missionaries.

Acts 16:6-10

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. 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.

In these verses, we see the Sovereign Spirit of God opening and closing doors for ministry. First we see the Sovereign Spirit, ...

1. Closing the Door (verses 6-8)

Verse 6 tells us that Paul and Silas and Timothy, ...

Acts 16:6

... went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

This missionary team tried to speak the word of God in Asia, but they were prevented from doing so.

Now, when we think of Asia, we think of China and Japan and Mongolia, but that isn't what the Bible means when it says, "Asia," it is referring to our modern day, southwestern Turkey. It was south of Phrygia and Galatia. It may have been that Paul was wanting to go to Ephesus, an influential city in Asia. Simon Kistemaker describes why this would make sense. He writes, "Paul's missionary strategy is to preach the gospel in important cities, preferable in commercial and administrative centers from which the Word of God can radiate in all directions."^[1]

It all makes sense on a human level! It was a great plan. Asia and Ephesus were prime candidates for the gospel. But the LORD was directing their steps. The Holy Spirit did not permit Paul and Silas and Timothy to enter into that region. Or, as I have said, the Holy Spirit was "Closing the Door."

At first blush, this is surprising. Paul and his team were doing a good thing. They were seeking to bring the gospel to Asia. Where, at this point in the book of Acts, the gospel had never been preached before! What could be more noble than such a task! But the Holy Spirit said, "No."

Now, exactly how this took place is difficult to know. Many have come up with possible scenarios. Perhaps an illness prevented the travel. Perhaps there was strong Jewish opposition, as there had been in the other cities where the gospel was preached. Perhaps there was a legal ban on Jewish travelers. Perhaps all on the team had a "united inward impression"^[2] that gave them all the conviction that it just wasn't right to go into Asia. Perhaps Silas, who was a prophet (Acts 15:32), received a message to give to the team, that Asia was not the place to go.

My hunch would be that it was more explicit than this. I would not be surprised to find out in eternity that it was the Holy Spirit who spoke audibly to all three of these men, warning them not to go. This isn't so far-fetched, because this is the way that the Lord launched the missionary movement in the first place. When the leaders of the church in Antioch were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke audibly to them telling them to "set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2). Perhaps the Spirit spoke to these men saying, "Do not go to Asia. Do not speak the word in Asia. I have other plans for you!"

Now, there is no way, really of knowing how the Holy Spirit forbade them to go into Asia. But somehow he did. And it was obvious that it was the Holy Spirit who hindered their progress. So, they didn't go south into Asia.

The same story repeats itself in verse 7.

Acts 16:7

And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.

Having been prevented from going south, they tried to go north into Bithynia. But somehow, "The Spirit of Jesus" prevented them.

Again, the same speculation comes. How did the Spirit of Jesus prevent them from going north? We don't know. Whether it was an inner sense that they all had that it was wrong to go north. Or an illness or some political opposition by the Romans, or some religious opposition from the Jews, or the prophetic wisdom of Silas.

But again, my hunch is that it was clearer guidance than any of these things. I would not be surprised if the Lord Jesus appeared to them, and spoke with them. This isn't so far-fetched. Do you remember when Paul (then known as Saul) was on the road to Damascus? Jesus, himself appeared to him as he walked along the way. And he spoke to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). Perhaps the Spirit of Jesus spoke with these men, saying, "Paul, Silas, Timothy, do not travel on the road to Bithynia. I will not allow you to preach the word in Bithynia!" Now again, there is no way, really of knowing how the Spirit of Jesus forbade them to go into Asia. But somehow he did. And it was obvious that it was the Jesus who hindered their progress.

So, having tried to go south, but being forbidden, and having tried to go north, but being not allowed, and coming from the east, what was their only option? West!

This is not so different than the Manifest Destiny of America. As a nation, we had settled on the east coast, with the wild frontier of the west that was wide open and available for exploration and settlement. As Horace Greeley presumably wrote, "Washington is not a place to live in. The rents are high, the food is bad, the dust is disgusting and the morals are deplorable. Go West, young man, go West and grow up with the country."^[3] And west they went!

Acts 16:8

So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.

The travels of this missions team was a far greater reality of "Manifest Destiny" than we ever experienced in America. For, it was clearly the hand of God that brought these missionaries to the west. It was the Holy Spirit forbidding them from going south. It was the Spirit of Jesus not

allowing them to go north.

So, they went west to Troas, One commentator described the city this way, "The city of Troas, situated some ten miles south of ancient Troy, was in the western part of Mysia. A Roman colony, it served as the European gateway to Asia Minor and the departure point for Macedonia." [\[4\]](#)

While in Troas, they were waiting. and didn't know where to go next. they didn't know what to do next. This is the way that God works in guiding us. There are times when he closes the door. Here in Acts, we see the Sovereign Spirit closing the door.

No doubt, this is the way that the Holy Spirit works in our lives as well as we seek his guidance for our lives, he closes doors. He closes doors on potential spouses. He closes doors on potential job changes. He closes doors on potential moves. He closes doors on couples wanting children. He closes doors on business opportunities. He closes doors on opportunities for the gospel! like he did for these missionaries. And we don't know why. This can be especially hard to those who are in those times of waiting. longing for a spouse, longing for a job, longing for some different place to live, longing for children. longing for direction, as these missionaries were in Troas, longing to know where God would have them go next.

Paul often knew this feeling. Later in his life, he would find himself in a Roman prison cell, longing for an open door. He wrote to those in Colossae, "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak" (Colossians 4:2-4). There was Paul, looking for an open door for the gospel. longing for an open door, praying for an open door, requesting that others pray for God to open a door for the word. No doubt, this is what Paul and Silas and Timothy were doing there in Troas. They were waiting. They were waiting for an open door. They were waiting upon guidance from the Lord as to where to go next.

If you find yourself waiting this morning, trust that the Sovereign Spirit is directing your life. Now, you may not have the clear displays of the presence of the Spirit of God in your life right now like these missionaries did. But don't doubt the presence of the Spirit in your life! If indeed, you are a believer. If indeed, you are seeking God's guidance for your life. Because the promise of the presence of the Spirit comes to those who believe in Jesus. If you are a believer, "God's Spirit dwells in you" (1 Corinthians 3:16). But if you are walking according to the flesh, God's Spirit is not in you. This is what Paul says in Romans 8:9, Romans 8:9 You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

Paul would later connect the presence of the Spirit in our lives with wisdom to know how to live our lives. He wrote to those in Ephesus, "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:15-18).

When you are seeking a God-honoring life, especially in the choices you are making with how to use your time, it is the presence of the Spirit of God that will make a difference in your life. To be guided by the Spirit, we must be filled with the Spirit.

Now, I wish that he would do so in my life like he did with these missionaries, making known his will clearly, even by shutting doors. But that's not the normal way in which God works today in our lives. The normal way is for God to fill with his Spirit, So our lives are focused upon the Lord. "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:19-21). There it is for us! The Spirit of God guides us as we worship him! and give thanks to him, and submit to one another in the fear of Christ.

I know that times of shut doors is difficult. But God doesn't shut a door, to keep us in the closet. He shuts a door, because, there's another door at the end of the hallway. As Don Moen wrote, ...

God will make a way
Where there seems to be no way
He works in ways we cannot see
He will make a way for me

He will be my guide
Hold me closely to His side
With love and strength for each new day
He will make a way,
He will make a way [\[5\]](#)

And that's what we see in verses 9 and 10. We see the Sovereign Spirit, ...

2. Opening the Door (9-10)

Acts 16:9-10

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.

In verses 9-10, we see this missionary team called to Macedonia. From Troas, Macedonia is across the sea. In verse 11, we see them traveling to Macedonia, stopping briefly on the island of Samothrace. When we look at this passage next time, we will see Paul and Silas and Timothy walking through the open door. But this morning, we see the Sovereign Spirit simply opening the door.

In verses 9-10, the Spirit does this through a vision "in the night." This vision opening the door, is just as mysterious as the ways in which the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Jesus closed the door on Asia and Bithynia.

In verse 9, this vision is called, "a vision." It was "in the night" so it may have been a dream. We don't know. But in this vision, there was this man standing in Macedonia, He was talking with Paul. Saying with some urgency, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (verse 9). With a little imagination, you can sense what the urgency of this man was like. He was like a castaway on a deserted island, summoning a boat for help. He is like a frantic mother over a son who had a tragic accident at the play ground. "Help us! Help us!" In this case, he was a man desperate for the gospel, pleading for others to come and preach to them.

That very night, Paul concluded that this was God's calling on their lives, to go to Macedonia. That's what we read in verse 10, "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. This was an "open door."

Now, in general, I would say, don't trust your dreams. I had a dream last night that I was flying my drone for some reason here in Rockford, but I had to stop by a neighbor's home in DeKalb, where I grew up. And this neighbor's home was down the street. And so, I went to the door and greeted my neighbor, who I have not seen for almost 40 years! I went there to get something, and instantly, I was back here in Rockford. But I was flying my drone at my old elementary school in DeKalb, to help the police with something. I don't know. It was all confangled. But with this dream last night, I'm not heading out to talk with the police, saying, "I had a dream last night about you needing help. Well, I'm here to help you. I have my drone. What do you need?" Any police officer would look at me like I'm crazy.

There are times when Christians receive some sort of dream, which they say is the Holy Spirit, and they are crazy. But who can argue with them? They had this dream! God has spoken directly to them! This often the point. Those with dreams can do anything that they want in the name of the Lord. "I had a dream! This is God's will for my life! I'm going to be a missionary. I'm going to China!"

More often, it's "I had a dream! Let's build that expensive house! Let's buy that expensive car! Let's pursue this business venture! Let's marry this girl!" People will often hold onto their dreams or visions, even when the people around are giving warning signs. In seeking the Lord's guidance in your life is the counsel of others. some of the best wisdom is found in Proverbs 15:22, "Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed."

There is a subtle point here in verse 10. Notice the pronouns in this verse. "We sought to go ... God had called us to preach the gospel to them." This is the beginning of one of the "we" sections in the book of Acts. When Luke, the author of Acts, comes and joins Paul in his work, he becomes an eye witness to the events that take place. That's why we read "we" in Acts. We will see several more of these sections in the book of Acts as we work our way through the text. (See Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16).

Perhaps right here is a subtle case that Paul didn't merely say, "I had this vision in the night! We are going to Macedonia." Rather, Paul related the vision to his missionary companions. They talked about it. They further prayed about it. And together, they made the decision that, yes, indeed, "God had called us to preach the gospel to [Macedonia]."

Now, this is surely not the ordinary way that God works in our lives. But who are we to limit God. God can do this again in our day. Indeed, he is doing this in our day. I have heard many testimonies of God using dreams today in Iran, particularly.

One website puts it this way:

We know Iran is one of the most closed and secretive nations in the Middle East and perhaps the world. Strict in its Islamic culture and history, Iran is known for an extremely low tolerance of Christians, and no tolerance for Muslims leaving their faith to become believers in Jesus Christ.

But, as you might expect, our loving God sees it differently. He sees a people in need of the saving Grace of Jesus Christ. Because he has no boundaries, he's doing something about it in a mighty way. Read this slowly to absorb it: Iran has the highest percentage (of the population) growth rate of Christianity in the entire world! In fact, more Iranians have come to Christ in the last 17 years than in the previous 1,400 years combined. Although we know that with God, all things are possible, it's almost unfathomable to comprehend. So, how is he doing it?

God is using dreams and visions with Iranian Muslims to bring them to him and he's built an infrastructure to support them after their conversion. Story after story is told of young and old who have seen Jesus in dreams and visions and renounced their faith to become Christians, despite the danger of persecution, imprisonment, and possibly even death.^[6]

This same website tells the story of Hussein:

Hussein came from a fanatically religious Muslim family in Iran. He zealously defended his religion and was highly intolerant of those who did not have similar beliefs. So radical was his thinking that when he learned that his brother-in-law, Mohammad, became a believer in Jesus, he set out to reconvert him or deal with the infidel. Mohammad would not renounce his faith in Jesus. One dark night, Hussein stalked Mohammad and stabbed him in the back, saying "I will not leave here until I have killed you as an apostate." Hussein was thwarted in his work by passersby. Mohammad survived after a long convalescence.

Obvious tensions continued for five years between Hussein and his brother-in-law, who recovered from the vicious attack. But in June 2017, the Lord worked in Hussein through a dream. In the dream, he was lying on the ground with many demonic monsters with terrible eyes torturing him. One of the creatures grabbed his throat to strangle him. Hussein began to call out all the names of the prophets that he could remember. But there was no answer until at the last moment, when he was about to breathe his last, with difficulty, he said "Oh Jesus Christ, if you exist save me!" Suddenly he saw Christ appear. Jesus cast the demonic creatures to one side and took Hussein by the hand and embraced him. Hussein then fell

at the feet of Jesus and worshiped him.

When Hussein awoke from the dream, he was very much afraid. But when he remembered that Jesus took him in his arms and embraced him, he became hopeful. He found comfort in the fact that after all his opposition to Christ and Christians, salvation was possible for him. The next morning Hussein made his way early to Mohammad's house where he embraced him and with many tears asked Mohammad for his forgiveness. And in their presence, he gave his heart to Christ.

Another website gives this testimony from a man named Fatehi. He says,

"But something that is happening so often among Muslims is that people are coming to know Jesus through dreams and visions," Fatehi said.

Fatehi told the story of a young mother at home watching her 3-year-old daughter.

"The phone rings, the mother is distracted — she's on the phone — and all of a sudden she hears a loud noise as though something heavy has dropped to the ground. Hanging up the phone, she runs into the kitchen and notices that her 3-year-old daughter has dropped a large kettle of boiling water all over her head.

The mother is terrified and in absolute fear and shock cries out saying to Jesus Christ 'Help me!' and she doesn't know why she says that. But that comes to her in that moment of trauma.

"The mother cried this sentence and then grabbed the child in her arms, taking her to the hospital. The child is admitted, and in the middle of the night while mother and child are asleep, the mother has a dream.

"In the dream she sees a male figure in the hospital room. She's dreaming of the hospital room she's in right now. She sees this male figure standing by the daughter's bed. And the figure is dressed in white — he's radiant with light — so the mother can't really make out his face.

"But the mother asks him 'Who brought you here — I didn't ask anyone to come and see my child? Did one of the nurses bring you here who are you?'

"The man responds by saying 'You called my name — I am here because you cried out to me in the kitchen.' He tells her that He is Christ revealing Himself to her, and that He will be with the child and with the mother in this difficult time.

"When the mother wakes up, she is enamored with Christ and decides to learn more about him, eventually giving her life to Christ, becoming a Christian and later becomes part of a house church.

"That is one of many stories, many, many, many stories of people seeing Christ in visions and dreams. This seems to be a way that God is choosing to reveal Himself with people in that part of the world. And Iranians, when they come to faith, they are very eager to share the Good News with others around them."^[1]

Now, we could spend the rest of today reading similar stories of those in Iran who are being converted through dreams in Iran. Initially, I'm hesitant to believe such fanciful stories. Further, I understand how one ought not to trust the internet for true stories. So, I don't know whether or not these exact stories are true. However, I have heard from enough different sources of the same thing. I have read similar things in books and magazines. I have heard interviews where people are reporting the same thing. So, I am inclined to believe that this is happening! I do believe that God is appearing to Iranians in dreams. Many are coming to Jesus as a result. But I also believe that this is rare in the workings of God. I believe that he is doing this Iran because of great restrictions in the country toward anything Christian. God is opening doors behind the closed doors of the country.

So, let us rejoice in the open doors that God is giving. But realize that God closes doors as well. These are for his great good. God would later bring his gospel to Asia. We will hear about it in the book of Acts Acts 19 When Paul eventually gets to Asia. God would later bring his gospel to Bithynia. In 1 Peter, he writes to the "elect exiles" in Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1). That is, Christians in Bithynia.

Often, this can be what a closed door means. It means something better. How often afterwards can we say, I'm so thankful that I didn't get that job. I'm so thankful that I didn't marry that guy. I'm so thankful that we didn't move. God has his plan for us. He will open and close doors to guide us in his will.

The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 13, 2022 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*(Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 582.

[2] John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 260.

[3] Attributed to Horace Greeley, *New-York Daily Tribune*, July 13, 1865. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go_West,_young_man.

[4] Kistemaker, 584. Kistemaker also points out that "In later years, Paul frequently visited Troas and preached the gospel (Acts 20:5-6; 2 Cor. 2:12; 2 Tim 4:13)."

[5] Here's one place where Don Moen's song is played: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zo3fJYtS-o>. There are many other videos on YouTube where this same song is recorded.

[6] <https://www.theoutreachfoundation.org/updates/2018/3/6/what-in-the-world-is-god-doing-in-iran>.

[7] <https://www.godreports.com/2018/10/iran-dreams-visions-fueling-unprecedented-church-growth/>.