Seeking Direction **by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 16th August 2026
at St John the Baptist Church, Aldenham

Reading(s): Acts 16:1-15

Introduction: the story so far

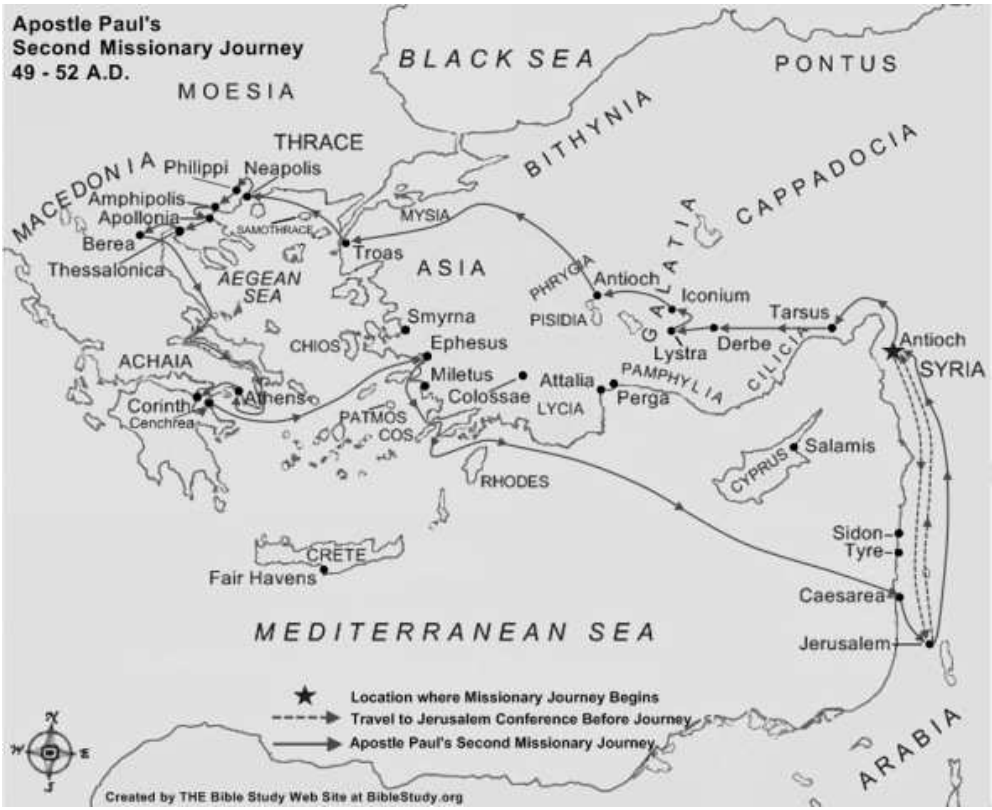
Our New Testament readings over the past two weeks have seen Paul, also known as Saul, being sent out with Barnabas by their church in Antioch, Syria on a mission to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. We saw them go to Cyprus and then on to mainland Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), sharing the gospel and planting churches. They return to Antioch and a bit later in chapter 15) go to Jerusalem to take part in an important meeting of the church leaders to discuss whether Gentiles who become Christians should be expected to keep the Torah, the Jewish Law. Thankfully, the ruling is that Gentiles won't have to be circumcised or keep all the dietary requirements, and Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch to share this ruling.

Paul's Second Missionary Journey

Paul hasn't forgotten his calling to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to other parts of the world, in fulfilment of Jesus' command to "make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:20). But first of all, he invites Barnabas to return with him to the churches they founded in Anatolia, to see how they are doing and to encourage them.

Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them, but Paul, remembering how he dropped out of the first missionary expedition, refuses, leading to an serious argument and Barnabas taking Mark back to Cyprus with him.

So Paul choses a new companion, Silas, who like him is both Jewish and a Roman citizen, a status which will later prove useful. And so together they set off overland to visit the churches in Anatolia - Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and another city called Antioch.



Paul is keen to move on to share the gospel in new areas. But where next? In today's reading, Paul and Silas are seeking direction from God. I'm sure we've all had significant moments in our lives when we too needed direction – should we make a career move, start to have children, move house, etc?

What criteria do we use to decide between several options? Do we ask God to guide us, and by what means might he do this? I think before we ask God for guidance, we need to be clear about why we want guidance in the first place. Paul was clear about his mission – to take the good news of Jesus to those who had not heard it. Before we make our plans, it's good to think and pray about how God might want to use us for his purposes, rather than just asking God to help us fulfil our own ambitions.

So now let's take a look at how Paul and Silas receive guidance in our Bible passage today.

Timothy

At the beginning of our bible passage, Paul makes an important decision which will have important consequences in the future. He gets to know a young man called Timothy, whose mother is Jewish but his father is Gentile. Paul sees in this young disciple a Christian leader of the future, and decides to take him on as an apprentice missionary. And although Paul strongly believes that new converts shouldn't have to follow the Torah, he has Timothy circumcised. The reason is simple: Paul's strategy is to take his message about Jesus first to local synagogues. Uncircumcised men weren't allowed to

sit in the same part of the synagogue as Jewish men. As a matter of integrity, Paul doesn't want to be underhand in any way. To win Jews, he follows Jewish practice, and to prevent Timothy's status proving to be a barrier, he is circumcised. So here's one principle that Paul follows for deciding how to act: practice integrity. Sometimes when making a decision we can be tempted to follow a course of action that is less than fully ethical, because it offers a shortcut to what we want to achieve. But if we want God to help us in our venture, it's important to be guided by Christian standards of behaviour, even if this makes things more difficult.

Closed doors

Having visited all the new churches, the apostles wonder where to go next? It is as this point that Paul's party seem to run into one obstacle after another.

> Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.[1]

Anatolia at the time was divided into several Roman provinces. The province of Asia was on the west coast, and its capital was Ephesus. (Not at all the area we refer to now as Asia!) The writer doesn't explain exactly what he means by saying that the Holy Spirit kept them from preaching in the province of Asia, or prevented them

[1] Acts 16:6-8 (NIV)

from entering Bithynia. One way or another God was shutting doors, which must have been frustrating and confusing, but Paul was sensitive enough to God's guidance to realise that God must be wanting him to go somewhere else.

That's another way God guides us – doors that are open or shut. For example, if we're applying for a new job, and have done our best to prepare well for the interview and so on, and prayed about it, being sure that we're doing this for the right motives (this is where integrity comes in), and put it in God's hands, and we don't get the job, then we can be pretty sure that God has other plans for us. I'm sure this principle will apply to school leavers who've just received their A level results and found they can't go their first choice university.

Paul's dream

So with plans A, B and C exhausted, Paul and his companions find themselves at the port of Troas, waiting for directions. And it is there that Paul has the dream about a man from Macedonia – the province that covered the northern half of Greece – *begging* him to "come over and help us".

Dreams are an important part of our brain's function, helping us subconsciously to sort the huge amounts of data that we absorb, and the many emotions that we experience, often without being fully aware of them. Reflecting on our dreams can be a useful way of identifying how we are coping with the demands of life, and what our inner desires or fears are. They can also be

a means that God uses to guide us. There are many examples in the Bible of God speaking to people through a dream, although we mustn't think that this was a common experience. Interpreting dreams isn't always a straightforward affair, but we shouldn't close our minds to the possibility of God speaking to us through them. In this case, it seems pretty clear to Paul and his companions that this is the answer to where they should go next:

We got ready at once to go to Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Before we move on to what happened next, I'd just like to reflect for a moment on those words spoken by the man from Macedonia in Paul's dream: "come over and help us". I find these words challenging. The message is not about material needs, but spiritual. It's easy enough for us to understand that people have material needs, such as not enough food or money, or emotional needs, which can be met by visiting someone who is sick or bereaved, for example, and giving them support and companionship. But what about people's *spiritual* needs? - their need to have a relationship with God as their heavenly Father, to have their sins washed away, and find a new direction and purpose for their lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. People need spiritual help as well as material and emotional help. The dream told Paul that God was sending him to bring spiritual help to the people of Macedonia. In the same way, the Church is called to bring spiritual help to the people of Aldenham and the

surrounding area, the United Kingdom and every other nation of the world.

So Paul and Silas respond to God's call, take a ship over to Greece and make their way to a leading city, Philippi.

An unexpected opportunity

So far, so good. Paul's strategy, as we have seen it so far in the Acts of the Apostles, is to go first to the local synagogue and tell his fellow-Jews that their Messiah had come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. But here in Philippi there doesn't seem to be a synagogue. What do we do when our usual way of doing things isn't available to us or just isn't appropriate for the job? Being willing to think outside the box and letting God show you another way is key to success. And so, making some enquiries, Paul and his team learn that there's a place used for Jewish prayers outside the city gate, and there, on the next Sabbath, they meet a group of women, including a businesswoman called Lydia. She doesn't even come from there, but she listens to the apostles and puts her faith in Jesus.

Meeting a group of women praying by a river might not seem an obvious way to start a church, particularly at that time in a very patriarchal society. But one woman in the group, Lydia, proves to be the linchpin in God's plan for the church that was to grow up in Philippi. She's a dealer in purple cloth, which was expensive because the dye came from a rare shellfish. So Lydia is a businesswoman, probably with some financial means. She invites the missionaries to stay at her house, which, it

seems, becomes the centre for the new church community that develops from this first encounter.

Notice how the writer describes Lydia's conversion: “the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14 NRSV). There are three aspects to someone coming to faith: the person who shares the good news, the person who receives it, and the Holy Spirit who works not only through the speaker but in the heart of the person who is listening. When we pray for others to come to faith, we need to pray that the Lord will open their hearts to the good news of Christ. Then we can speak and share and invite and watch God at work.

And so the Philippian church begins. On the face of it, it's just a handful of women, perhaps not the most influential members in the patriarchal society at the time. But twenty years later, Paul, now in prison in Rome, writes his letter to the Philippians, a church that by now has elders and deacons, and whom he thanks for their generous gift of money, and reminds them of how, after he had left Philippi, the Christians there had been the only church to support him financially (Philippians 4:10-18). They might have started off small, but they had big hearts and expressed their support for Paul's mission not only by words and prayers, but by giving. He describes them as “my brothers and sisters whom I long for, my joy and crown” (Phil 4:1). So there’s a lesson for us here too – don’t underestimate what God can do from seemingly unpromising beginnings. The wisdom of following God’s

guidance may only be seen some time later. A newly planted tree may take a few years before it bears fruit. As Jesus said, the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that can grow into a shrub big enough to host nesting birds.

One of the joys of my work is to see people come to faith and grow in it. I wonder who were the people who shared their faith with you? Did they have the joy of seeing you find God for yourself and grow in faith? What about those we know, and care about, members of our family, friends, work colleagues, neighbours? Are there any of them who we would like to see come to a living faith in Jesus Christ? If you are not already praying for them, why not start today? Remember that it is God who works in people's hearts to bring them to faith. But perhaps there might be a practical part that you could play too, by sharing with them something of your own faith in God, your own experience of his presence, his peace, his guidance, or by inviting them to explore faith for themselves, or just to come with you to church one time?

Conclusion

In today's reading we've seen how the apostle Paul sought to follow the guidance of God. There are several ingredients to his approach, which include having integrity in our motives and following principles, being patient when faced with closed and no doubt having to wait some time before the way forward becomes clear, being willing to accept that preferred approaches aren't

going to work, and letting God guide you to try new things and find him at work in unexpected places.

There are, of course, other ways that God guides us, including through reading the Bible, through prayer and the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit, and through the advice of other people, whether Christians or not.

But God also works through events we would consider negatively: for example the argument that Paul and Barnabas had over John Mark led to Barnabas having a ministry in Cyprus and Paul recruiting a new member to his team, Silas, who was to have an important role in the church in future. God has the ability to bring good out of any situation.

Navigating our way through life involves seeking direction and making decisions. As Christians, our heart's desire is to bring glory to God through the way we live our lives. So we should seek his guidance in all that we do, and seek to live with integrity, recognising that the way ahead may not at first be clear, and that decisions may not always be easy. But if we commit ourselves to God and seek to do his will, he will work out his purposes in our lives for our good, for the benefit of others and for his own glory.

I'd like to leave with a verse from the Psalms:

Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will act. Psalm 37:5.

A prayer for the sharing of the gospel:

Gracious God,

we thank you that you have brought us to know and recognise you through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We thank you for those who shared the Gospel of Jesus with us.

We ask that in turn we may pass the Good News on to others.

Give us confidence to speak of you,

sensitivity to walk with others on their journey,

and love to inspire us to reach out to others.

Most of all, give us a passion to see your Kingdom come,

that we might take risky steps

to be your witnesses to your world.

Through your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.