

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

R₂L – Resolved to Live: By God’s Guidance (Part 4)

Acts 15:36-16:10

Acts 16:1-10

1 Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, 2 and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. 3 Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. 4 Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. 5 So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily. 6 They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; 7 and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; 8 and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. 9 A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 10 When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

I was a late bloomer, academically speaking. Throughout my elementary and Jr. High school years, my grades were peppered with mostly B’s along with a few C’s and those occasional A’s. Then, starting in High School, something clicked. I figured out how to read my teachers and to give them what they asked for. My grades improved and yet I still felt a bit cursed (a curse that I know would not seem to be a curse to many); for no matter how hard I tried, I got through my four years of High School getting all A’s and one B every semester.

In the Fall of my Junior year, some six months before I would come to know Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, I started making preparations for College, taking Advanced Placement courses. I truly enjoyed life sciences, biology, physiology and the like and had determined to go into either Marine Biology or into Bio-chemical Engineering. I worked on my SAT testing because while I knew I could always go to San Diego State University; the prestigious school for my degree choices was Revell College of the University of California at San Diego. I began to map out my course; keeping my grades up. Then, in the Spring of my Junior year (this would be 1984), something happened. Through a series of events in meeting up with some friends from my Jr. High school days in the town I used to live in, I was gloriously introduced to Christ, and, on April 29, 1984, I received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

My life was in many ways dramatically changed. The language I used, the things I thought, and most importantly, and my chief motivation to be successful for me and do things to please me had changed into a passion to know and serve Christ. I had been given a Bible and I began to devour its contents; reading page after page, often times having no real clue as to the meaning of what I was reading; but I was reading. My priorities changed and I got deeply involved in a good youth group that was so incredibly Christ-focused and Bible-centered that it took me many years to learn that what the Lord put me into was simply not the norm for youth groups. Being a piano player, but not being able to easily transport such an instrument to the parks and beaches where we often would meet, I took up guitar and began playing with the other youth worship leaders. I got involved with Bible quizzing and memorization, filling my mind with the contents of Romans,

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Philippians, 1 John and others. I was given opportunities to give my testimony and even to teach. My life had been changed.

One thing that had not changed though all of this was my determination and passion for Biology. During my Senior year I took my SAT college exams and my scores were high enough to apply to the University of California at San Diego. I was accepted, and due to my grades, had earned Pell and Cal grants to pay for the education. Up to this point, while Jesus had radically changed my life; in the ways that I thought and acted, Jesus was still my co-pilot, along for the journey that I had set for myself. I declared my major to be Bio-chemical Engineering, wanting to get my degree, go into research and development, and thus to make lots of money. And whereas before my goal was money for whatever I wanted, my worldview had changed enough to at least say that now I would make money and give it to the church for the works of ministry. That was my plan. I had proved myself academically. I was recognized by my scores, the government acknowledged me in the grants and the prestigious school had accepted me. The course was set. What could go wrong?

My freshman year at UCSD was a spiritual challenge and an academic disaster. Having breezed through my High School mathematics, my Calculus class was a vicious animal that sought to tear my limb by limb. I spent hours and hours with friends who were gifted in higher math; but no matter what they did, Calculus did not compute. I begged God for understanding, but it was as if a door was slammed shut. Additionally, in my Humanities class, a class that was surveying the progress of civilization, my first semester found me with an Atheistic Jewish professor who literally picked apart the authenticity of the Old Testament. Having been a Christian for just about a year and a half, his criticism of the Old Testament almost shattered my faith. And my first biology class was called, "Origins and Evolution" – yet another attack on the authenticity of the Genesis record. I found myself struggling spiritually, knowing that what the Bible said did not line up in any way with what I was learning in my classes. Along with this, my Chemistry class became another source of sorrow. In my first year at UCSD, I had to drop two classes, and nearly burned myself out just trying to maintain a C average. I pleaded with God during this time; asking Him why I was struggling as a student; why He was not helping me learn and become successful; and even wondered before Him if all this Bible stuff was true.

By God's providence, I was in a good church, filled with some students who were attending one of the local Christian Colleges, Christian Heritage College, which was founded by Dr. Henry Morris of the Institute for Creation research along with Tim LaHaye. The president of the school, when I eventually attended there was Dr. David Jeremiah. My friends set up a meeting for me with one of the professors there and I brought in my long list of questions concerning faith, evolution and the Bible. For a couple of hours this man, Dr. Richard Nissan, worked me through these things, giving me reasons for the hope that both he and I had in Christ. Dr. Nissan gave me a number of books, which I devoured, books that answered my questions and clarified my perspective.

Through much prayer, still asking God why He had allowed my first year at UCSD to be such a disaster; how He would allow my previously stellar academic achievements to be so tainted, taking along with it my grants and scholarships, I saw the door close on my dream of Bio-chemical engineering. I did not return to UCSD, but attended Mesa College for a year, just trying to finish my general education while trying to figure out what I was supposed to do with my life. All this time, I had been reading books on Christian apologetics, on the evolution and creation

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controversy and studying my Bible. I was being asked to teach more and more in the youth group and was being told by a number of people that I was going to be a preacher. Still holding on to my dream, I would tell people that I was going to get back into biology of some sort. But God kept closing the doors, until it was suggested that I attend Christian Heritage College as they offered a biology degree and then I could attend the Institute for Creation Research to get my masters. Maybe God was opening a door. I applied to Christian Heritage and initially thought I would be a biology major, but during this time, my heart was overjoyed with learning scripture and teaching it. Just before I submitted my application, through much prayer and counsel, I applied for the Pastoral and Biblical Studies program, and was accepted. To my great pleasure, at least this degree did not require me to take any more math!!!

The Lord opened the door and I received grants and some loans to get me through. I was able to graduate CHC with academic honors and immediately was offered a pastoral internship in Grand Junction, Colorado, the place where my son, Luke would be born. From this point, although there have been ups and downs; smooth paths and bumpy roads, the Lord has always made it clear what He wanted me to do; to preach, pray or die (or to lead music) and by God's grace that is what I have been doing full time for some 25 years come this September.

Why do I take the time to share this testimony with you? Remember that as we have been looking at Acts 15:36-16:10, our theme has been noticing in the lives of Paul, Barnabas and others in the early church to be resolved to live by God's guidance. We have been noting how the Holy Spirit uses all sorts of means to lead His people where He wants them to God. In Acts 15:36-41, we saw that the Spirit uses discord among godly people to accomplish His purposes. (By way of reminder, the Spirit does not cause the discord; nor does He desire the discord; but He can use discord to put His people where He wants them. In Acts 16:1-5, we see that the Holy Spirit uses the process of discipleship to accomplish His purposes of making Christ known as Paul takes along with him and mentors a young disciple named Timothy. This reminded us that if we want to be guided by God, we must be resolved to be involved in discipleship, in the process of either making or of being made into a more fervent follower of Jesus.

All of this brings us to Acts 16:6-10, where we see the final two means of this larger passage by which the Holy Spirit guides His people; not only must we be resolved to know that God leads us even in the midst of our discords; and not only will He use discipleship to guide us; but in verses 16:6-7 God guides us through divine discouragements and in verses 8-10, we see Him guide us through divine directives.

I. The Holy Spirit Leads Through Disheartening Discord (15:36-41)

II. The Holy Spirit Leads Through Determined Discipleship (16:1-5)

III. The Holy Spirit Leads Through Divine Discouragements (16:6-7)

6 They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; 7 and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them;

It is here where I would like to tie in my opening testimony to our study. Sometimes God will allow things, bring things or even keep things from us that may initially cause us to be disappointed; circumstances that make us wonder if God is really for us because it seems that everything is against us. For me, my college career at UCSD was running into roadblock after

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roadblock. As even my wife can testify, I was greatly discouraged and disappointed during this time, not realizing at the time that God was using it to funnel me to the place He wanted me.

This is what we see in our text in even greater fashion with Paul, Silas and Timothy. By the use of discord, the Holy Spirit pushed Paul north, rather than east to revisit the churches he and Barnabas had started on the first missionary journey. This route had Paul enter the cities he had previously preached through the proverbial back door. This led Paul to Derbe and Lystra, where he was introduced to a dynamic young believer named Timothy. Thus far, everything was going well. Paul, according to Acts 15:41 was strengthening the churches in Syria and Cilicia and according to Acts 16:1 and 5, he was strengthening the churches in and near Derbe, Lystra and Iconium. What a blessing all of this was to Paul, to return to the churches and people he had impacted for the gospel in these places. Having visited these three cities, where would Paul want to go next? He would naturally want to visit the other churches and people he had impacted for the gospel in the cities of Attalia, Perga and on down to the Island of Cyprus and the cities of Paphos and Salamis.

Now we read in our text that Paul and his companions were allowed to travel throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia; taking them to one of the cities previously visited, Antioch in Pisidia (verse 6); but then we see something remarkable. Luke records that the Holy Spirit had forbidden them from preaching the Word in the province of Asia. On a map, the province of Asia would represent the western area of Asia Minor. Why didn't Paul head south to the other cities of the first missionary journey? Perhaps he realized that Barnabas and Mark would most likely already be there at this time; and so, Paul heads west. The Holy Spirit forbids them from preaching there. The word “forbidden” here means to keep, restrain, halt. The Holy Spirit slammed the door on heading directly west to visit the important city of Ephesus. Discouraged by that, Paul and the team seek to head more toward the north and west to Mysia, coming first to the northern regions of Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit whose purpose it was to make Jesus known where the Spirit wanted Jesus to be known, did not permit them to preach the word there.

Can you begin to imagine the frustration of Paul? He had a plan. It was all mapped out and even when he sought to improvise, the Holy Spirit shut the doors. One of the questions that comes from all of this is just how did the Holy Spirit discourage Paul from going into these areas? Was it through the granting or taking away of a sense of peace? Sometimes that is how God directs us today. We pray about a direction we are considering and if we have peace about it, we pursue it and if we do not, we seek another course. Perhaps the Holy Spirit presented Paul and his team with difficult circumstances. Maybe he could not get the right transportation; or perhaps there was sickness on the team. My suspicion is the latter. While I cannot prove this, I believe that Paul started to suffer from some kind of illness and I base this on the fact of something we note down in verse 10. Up until verse 10, Luke, the author of this history, refers to Paul and his team as “they”; but in verse 10, after a divine vision, notice what Luke says, **“When [Paul] had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia...”** The “we” now includes Luke, the physician, whom it is believed attended to Paul's physical sufferings.

Whatever the circumstances, we know that it got difficult for Paul and the team. What was it that kept him going, regardless of setbacks, of discouragements, of sickness and closed doors? What is it that ought to keep us going when God changes our plans and courses of action? It is very simple, something you all know, at least in your heads, but what must also guide our

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thoughts and actions. Paul knew that God was in control! Paul knew that God was sovereign (in control of all things); that God was providential (the one who brings all things to pass according to His time and purpose). Paul entrusted his life, his occupation, his very friendships to the hand of God. I think it safe to say that Paul would echo the words of Job who said; **“Though He slay me, I will hope in Him”** (Job 13:15). The Holy Spirit was leading Paul through difficulties and discouragements, and while at times he may have been frustrated, Paul kept coming back to the truth that God is God; God is good; God is in control; and God can do with me whatever He wants, whenever He wants.

How can I say this was Paul’s heart? I can say this because Paul would demonstrate this attitude of God being in control even in the most seemingly discouraging of circumstances. Remember what Paul wrote in Philippians 1:12, while under house arrest, chained to a Roman guard, seemingly hindered from spreading the gospel? He said, **“Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel...”** That is Paul-speak for “God-rules”; that God’s purposes will not be thwarted by discord, envy or strife, but that God will use difficulties and discouragements to accomplish His goals. To the believers in Corinth, who may have wondered if Paul’s setbacks and discouragements would cause him to shrink back he wrote, **“we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing...”** (2 Corinthians 4:8). He continue to trust God in the hard times? Why? He says why in 2 Corinthians 4:11, **“For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”**

One of the most discouraging exercises we allow ourselves to indulge in is the “what if” crunch. For Paul, he could have second guessed himself saying, “What if we had never taken John Mark with us on that first journey;” or “what if John Mark had not deserted us;” or “what if I was not always getting sick;” or “what if I was a better communicator;” or “what if I had just stayed in Antioch and served as a pastor there.”

Do you play the “what if” game? I understand that we need to learn from any mistakes that we may make. Did I make a mistake going to UCSD? Was that done from a sinful, rebellious heart? I don’t think so. I may not have had all the right motives, but I prayed about it and doors were originally opened. “What if I had gone directly from High School into Pastoral/Biblical Studies?” What “what ifs” are you indulging and perhaps using as excuses not to be everything God wants you to be?

Paul did not pity himself and his situation. He knew that God was leading and guiding through all these things. Later, Paul would write these words to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:1-3:

1 You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 2 The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. 3 Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

Paul demonstrated a resolve to something to which we too often fail in attitude and action; that is to remain faithful, committed, determined, steadfast and fixated on the Lord and to believe that He is guiding us even through the difficulties and discouragements. As the hymn-writer penned:

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*He leadeth me; O blessed thought!
O words with heavenly comfort fraught!
What'er I do, wher'er I be,
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.*

So, Paul, through difficulties and discouragements, was been funneled by the Spirit of God to the place where God would have him be. This brings us to the last of the means in this passage by which God guides His people. He does so through discord, through discipleship, through divine discouragements and finally...

IV. The Holy Spirit Leads Through Divine Directives (16:8-10)

8 and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. 9 A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 10 When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Troas was a city on the northwestern coast of Asia Minor. Paul had reached the end of the region. The Spirit of God had kept me from going south or north and he certainly was not ready to return back to the east. But what did God want him to do? We see in verses 8-10 the Spirit leading through divine directives. For Paul, the Spirit gave a vision, some kind of dream the meaning of which was clear; the people of Europe were in desperate need of hearing the gospel. “Come over to Macedonia and help us!”

I find a couple of things intriguing here. First of all, the vision is clearly given to Paul, not to the others on the team. But notice in verse 10 that upon sharing this vision with the team, Luke records, “we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.” Paul obviously sought the input of his companions. What if the vision was the result of bad pizza the night before? Yet, upon sharing the vision, they all came to the same conclusion; they were all united in going to Europe. The word “concluding” literally means “to be knit together;” interwoven in purpose. Like stirring honey into your tea so that you can no longer see the honey but you can taste it; upon hearing the vision and recognizing it from God as a divine directive, they blended together for the purpose.

This is no small thing that we read of here. Do you realize that this vision, this divine directive is responsible for bring the gospel to us? The message of Jesus would leave the “eastern” regions and become the faith of the West as well. All because Paul was faithful to the revelation God gave him to help the helpless by preaching the gospel.

And while we do not receive visions and dreams like Paul received here; we do have divine directives that call us to have compassion and pity on the lost; to preach the gospel to all creation; to be ready to preach the word; to give reasons to those who ask us why we hope in Christ. We are every bit as duty bound to respond to the divine directive given to us as Paul was to respond to his vision. And just what is our divine directive? You know it well. You hear it all the time. And the question is not, “Do I know what the directive is; but rather; am I resolved to fulfill the directive, even when it seems at times as though God is closing doors?” What is the directive? [pause]. **“Go therefore and make disciples (fervent followers and learners of Jesus) of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...”** Have you heard that

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before? Yes! Do you seek to apply yourself to that directive with the same resolve and determination as Paul did when he received his vision?

How about this one, **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My ... witnesses... [My testifiers, my communicators; my mouthpieces, my spokesmen; my heralds; my preachers; my proclaimers].** Have you heard that before? Yes! Do you seek to apply yourself to that directive with the same resolve and determination as Paul did when he received his vision?

Why should we apply ourselves to obey God’s divine directives; or to not lose heart in times of divine discouragements; or to be involved in determined discipleship; or to not give up in times of disheartening discord? Because, beloved, God uses all of these things to lead us and guide us into the fulfilling of His purposes.

Do you believe that God will use frustrating, perplexing failures and heartaches to bring to us a fresh understanding of purpose and direction in our lives? Do you believe that God can restore the years the locust have eaten with great abundance as He promised Israel in Joel 2:25-27? Do you believe that God can even use our faults and failures to bring about even greater blessings?

Beloved, let us remember that God guides us according to His perfect plan for our lives and service to Him. His purposes will not be thwarted. Let us not put God into the box of our previous experiences. We are limited, God is not. Sometimes God will direct us west when we want to go north or south and we do not know why. He does not even bother to give us a vision as he did to Paul; but one thing we must remember is this; that God guides us through every situation, whether it seem good or bad in order to accomplish His perfect will for His own glory as well as for our own good. Let us pray:

Our great God and Father, please forgive us of those times when we have refused to walk or serve in harmony with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. We praise You for Your graciousness to use our failures to bring about greater fruit in our character and service to You. We praise You that Your redirection is always the best direction; that Your plan is always better than our plans. Help us, Lord, to live before You in humble, eager and willing obedience; resolving to be guided by You, into Your will, step by step. We pray these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

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