

Welcome to the Mission Field

Kevin Freeman / General

Acts 16:5–14

You and I are experiencing a "new normal" amid the Covid-19 outbreak. Our plans have been redirected. On Paul's mission trip, his plans were redirected, too. His story reveals some principles that will help us be used by God as plans change in real time. Welcome to the mission field!

Notes

Recorded on video and streamed online during Covid-19 crisis

Cultural Shift: Missions in India...and America

On our original church sermon schedule, I was slated to share with you about my trip to India back in January. While on that mission trip, I remember traveling within India from Chennai to Coimbatore by plane. I got my hands on an in-flight newspaper and began reading up on a little virus called nCOVID-19, what we now popularly call Coronavirus. This virus itself seemed remote, even while in India, though as reports of cases spread, I remember hoping I would be able to get back home before flights out of India were canceled. That seems like a pretty long time ago now.

But most of my time in India was not spent considering this coronavirus. It was instead spent considering how I could effectively communicate God's truth to a group of pastors who had taken four days away from their families to receive training. This was a bit of an adjustment for me. I stumbled out of the gate, so to speak, during my first lecture presentation. My version of a lecture was the kind you would find in a university setting. My content was good, I think, but I did not get the sense that I connected with my audience. It's kind of like preaching to a

camera in an empty sanctuary, I suppose. Anyway, after seeing my partner, Paul, lead his session, I got a sense of how to present. The audience preferred a hybrid presentation – part lecture, part dynamic sermon. After asking a few folks for feedback on how to improve, I was advised to tie in the many local cultural experiences I had seen for illustrations. Apparently, these native pastors wanted to hear about a foreigner’s interactions with their culture. That night in my hotel room, I furiously re-worked all of my notes to include some places to be “preachier,” and marked down several stories about seeing the local fishermen, visiting monuments, getting stuck in Chennai traffic, and eating spicy food. Adjusting to this new normal required a measure of flexibility, agility, and sleeplessness.

Here we are amid a new normal, ourselves. We haven’t travelled to a new culture, but God has seen fit to bring a new culture to us. It is breathtaking the sort of shift that has happened in our culture virtually overnight. A society that has valued sporting events, instruction in schools, gathered worship, and going out to eat suddenly values medical masks, toilet paper, and isolation. We need flexibility and agility, but I’ll advocate for a decent night’s sleep.

More than that, we need an ear that listens to the whisper of God’s Spirit in us. So, welcome to the mission field! You now get to discover brand new ways to participate in an activity that has been happening for only 2,000 years. In Acts 16 we read about Paul’s experience on what became his second major missionary journey. Paul and company had some great missions opportunities lined up, but God had other plans. God interrupted Paul’s plans, and he interrupts ours for his good purposes. This is no longer the best Sunday for my mission trip update, but I want to read you Paul’s mission trip update from Acts 16:5-10.

Acts 16:5–10 ESV

So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

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.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Paul’s update comes in the middle of his trip. The early church had a dispute about items of faith, mainly because Jews and Gentiles both now claimed the Christian faith. The churches had appealed to the elders in Jerusalem to settle the dispute. After they did, Paul & Co. were sent to share the results, perhaps because their live stream platform was down. We see the positive result that the news strengthened the church and helped it to grow. This put Paul at the furthest reaches of his first missionary journey. Seeing God’s hand at work and having a new home base from which to launch, Paul ambitiously determined to travel and share the gospel to other nearby towns.

Pardon the Interruption

The first key we find from Paul’s mission experience is to **pardon the interruption**. As I said earlier, Paul’s mission team had some good plans designed to share Christ either to the immediate west or up north. First they wanted to spread the gospel in Asia. This was not the continent as we know it but rather the western third of modern Turkey. Luke, the author of this book, says they were “forbidden by the Holy Spirit.” There aren’t any details to explain how they knew the Spirit had forbidden them. Maybe it was some kind of direct message. Maybe they prayed about it and God led them to feel uneasy. Maybe there was an outbreak of a virus, and the province of Asia was on lockdown. We don’t know, but we do know that God often prevents us from things through circumstances beyond our control. Trusting God, and having learned the phrase, “When God closes a door he opens a window,” the mission team tried to travel north to Bithynia. They were prevented from going there, too. It wasn’t until they continued traveling toward the coast that Paul received a vision from a man in Macedonia – what we now refer to as the Macedonian Call. You could say they first wanted to evangelize over in the next county, then in the next country, but God actually directed them to the next continent.

I am reminded of how our church has seen God's hand at work. We have witnessed another high-water mark for Upward basketball and cheer registrations. Our ESL ministry has been revamped to a new format. Marbles are being moved with every faith conversation. Our first new Grace Group has begun, with another in the works. Like Paul, we've been excited to see God's hand at work and have made plans to plunge ahead to share his love with others. But also like Paul, we've seen that God's plans differ from our own. The Holy Spirit, working through our elected officials during the Covid-19 pandemic, has prevented us from many kingdom-minded endeavors we had planned. We are being directed toward something else. This is the time to trust God's guidance and keep moving along.

The deadly virus known as Smallpox was responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of people. It was this disease that killed an estimated ninety per cent of Native Americans. In Europe during the 1800s, about 400,000 people were killed by it each year. The first ever vaccine was created in response to Smallpox. It happened after Edward Jenner, an English doctor, observed that many milkmaids seemed immune to Smallpox. In each of these cases, these milkmaids had previously contracted Cowpox. That makes me wonder if there is some sort of "Cow-rona" virus we could get our hands on. Anyway, Jenner tested his theory by applying a scraping of one woman's Cowpox lesion and inoculating it into the arm of a nine-year-old boy. This might not be up to the FDA's current testing standards, but future attempts to expose this boy to Smallpox proved he was now immune. If Jenner had not turned to study Cowpox, and if he hadn't been observant enough to notice milkmaids were unlikely to acquire Smallpox, the vaccine to this deadly disease likely would not have been found.

Progress on a new endeavor – like a vaccine – cannot happen unless old endeavors are interrupted. If we are willing to interrupt our routines and observe where God might be leading us, we can be ready for the new endeavors he is sending our way. How has it been for you? Has your week felt like a new endeavor or an interruption of your former schedule? I will just tell you that as of this past Monday – the first day of school closures and the urge to self-quarantine – I was ready for all of this to be over. I still want that, but this week has taught me to keep my eyes open for where God is leading.

Stay Faithful

The second key we find from Paul and his fellow missionaries is to **stay faithful**.

Acts 16:11-14

Acts 16:11–14 *ESV*

So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.

Through a dream, God tells this mission team to travel to Europe. After a few stops, they land in Philippi, and it becomes clear they have no contacts. There is no partnering church, and there are no fellow Christians. This little mission team maintained their faithfulness by attending the worship service. Verse 13 shares they went outside the city to what is known as the Gangites River. Normally, Paul would enter a city and go to the local synagogue on the Sabbath, so why did he go to the river instead? Jewish law stated that a locality could not build a synagogue until at least ten male heads of household could form the congregation. Until then, the custom was to meet in the open air along a nearby water source. It was this place of prayer where faithful women had gathered. There were either no Jewish men, or they were not willing to take up their responsibility according to the law. So we see these women becoming the initial gospel contact, and Lydia is the first baptized convert.

I love the wording that “the Lord opened her heart,” so that she heard Paul’s presentation of the gospel. You see God working through people who are maintaining faithfulness to him. Think of these women who faithfully gathered every Sabbath to meet and pray, even though by custom they did not have a teacher present. It would have been easy to stop, but they continued week after week. Think of Paul and his companions – only men were mentioned on this team – who would have inquired about a synagogue and learned there wasn’t one in

Philippi. They did not have to go to the river, but they did. When they did, they could have backed away because there were only women present. That sort of gender judgmentalism was common. But in faithfulness to God and his message, they went to this handful of women.

Right now our own place of meeting for worship is outside the norm. We are streaming, so that's kind of like a digital river. Maybe you were tempted not to sign on today. Maybe you aren't a big fan of the worshipers gathered with you today. These events over the past couple weeks have been less than ideal for all of us, but let me urge you to stay faithful. Keep spending time in God's Word and in prayer. Like we are told in Hebrews, "Do not forsake meeting together," even if it is online. Learn together with you family and with your grace group – find a way to connect with them. Encourage each other.

We cannot stop being faithful to these things, and do you know why? You can't quarantine the hand of God. Our powerful God can be at work whether his church is gathered or scattered. He opens hearts by the stream or by streaming. Right now he is looking for his church to remain faithful to him.

City Temple, London, was bombed not once, but twice, in 1941. The twenty-two-hundred-member congregation, who for the most part lived vast distances from the church, had no place to worship save a small hall. For his first sermon in this interim situation, the pastor, Leslie Weatherhead, chose as his subject, "The Power of God." He said, "We felt gloriously close to the church of the first century as we prayed and sang, with London burning all around us."

Here we are, for now a grouping of house churches, much like the first century church. Now we get to live out faithfulness and see God's hand at work, knowing that we are connected to his power in the body of Christ.

See God's Hand at Work

That's it. Be willing for God to interrupt your plans and stay faithful as he directs you. Eventually there comes what I call an **impact opportunity**. It's the product of simply being about God's business and then seeing God's hand at work. God works through this obedience for his good purposes. I encourage you to finish reading Acts 16 on your own to see what happened in Paul's case. It all starts

with a demon-possessed slave girl and leads to a riot, jail time, and an earthquake. It looks like a closed ministry door, but the church in Philippi was started from this impact opportunity.

They aren't always that dramatic, but we do our part so the world will know Jesus.

Richard Blackaby commented this week,

“The Church has tended to grow most in times of crisis, not in periods of prosperity. While the business community rightly fears loss as a result of the crisis, the kingdom of God may be about to experience enormous gain...keep your spiritual eyes and ears alert, for we may be at the brink of one of the greatest movements of God in recent history.”

Whether short-term or long-term, God will bring his impact through your willing faithfulness.

Let's pray