

This past Sunday, a large group of Fellowship participated in Next90. It was a moment three months in the making and three years in the making. Through it, our two words became a starting line and not a finish line, and we spent a couple of hours together asking God what the next 90 days of our lives should be focused on. It was led by Caleb Panter, who will be joining our staff in a couple of months, and Caleb encouraged us to focus on two questions: 1) What is God up to? 2) How can we partner with him in that? They are two very big questions to ask because they are the essence of discovering and living out your God-given purpose. They are also significant to ask because they rightly put God in the central role of all we are and do.

If there has been a concern about our focus on purpose, it's that it can become about us, internally focused naval gazing. But if we make it about us, we make ourselves responsible for the plan and the results. I don't know about you, but if I'm responsible for that, I'm going to freeze. I'll struggle to know what to do and where to go, afraid of what I'll encounter along the way, doubtful that I'm up to the task, that I don't have what it takes. I've talked to many of you who have a hesitation around God-given purpose for that very reason. "It's up to me to figure it out, and up to me to make it happen." But that couldn't be further from the truth. If it's up to us, if we are the central figure in all we do, we'll fail. But if God is the central character, if he's in the driver's seat, he's the one who will guide, grant, guard, and grow our work and mission, and we are simply along for the ride.

So where are we in the story? In Acts 1:8, Jesus said his disciples would be witnesses in Jerusalem, all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And that's how we've seen the gospel triumphantly march throughout the world. Chapter 16 begins with Paul leaving Antioch with Silas, adding Timothy to his ministry team, and going back to the churches he visited in his first missionary journey to deliver the decision made by the Jerusalem council we read about last week. The result? As Luke has now done five times, he gives a progress report, and lets us know **"the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily."** The church leaders took a moment to determine the truth of the gospel, went back out to preach it, and God increased their numbers. We get to another turning point because God is going to move the gospel into what we know as Europe.

Acts 16:6-10 ⁶ And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷ And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. ⁸ So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ 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.

Geographically, Phrygia, Galatia, Asia, Bithynia, are all next, and Paul is full steam ahead to go into those unreached places for the gospel. But God has other plans. Why? [SLIDE] **Sometimes God says "no" to one thing in order to say "yes" to something else.** Paul is forbidden to go there but, instead, receives a vision of a Macedonian man asking to come help them. It's clear Paul is asking "What is God up to? And how can I partner with him?" He has put God at the center of all he's doing and submits to his guidance.

I've had my own experience with that. I came on staff in 2013 as a church planting resident in order to plant Fellowship Richardson on Easter Day 2016. I even found the appointment still on my Outlook calendar: LAUNCH DAY!!!! And you can tell how excited I was by the number of exclamation points I used. But in the spring of 2015, God put a pause on that, we spent two years seeking God to see if that plan needed to change, and in the spring of 2017, the elders asked me to be the next Lead Pastor here. And I'm so thankful.

Are you asking God "What do I do?" It's a faithful question because it puts God in the center and it's a bold question because it assumes God has an answer and wants to guide you. Too many of us, though, ask that question, try to figure it out on our own, then freeze. But we don't have to. God wants to guide you. It may not be through a vision, but God will stir your heart, give you passions, burdens, things you **must** do, confirm with his Word and his people. That guidance may be down the path you're already walking, or it may be in a direction different than you had planned. But that doesn't mean sit and wait for divine revelation. Notice Paul is on the move as this is happening. **Sometimes we won't know until we go.** As MLK said, "Faith is taking the first step even if we don't see the whole staircase." God wants us to take a step forward in faith, partner with him, and trust him to direct our steps. And trust that if you are living for the Kingdom of God, you're on the right path. If he's not closing the door, keep going. And as we go, God will be the one who grants us success, who bears fruit in our ministry...

Acts 16:11-15a ¹¹ So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ And after, she was baptized, and her household as well.

Paul makes it to Philippi and we see what God is up to. The gospel will ultimately get to Asia, but God wanted Paul here first. There is a group of women who are worshippers of the one true God, and their hearts are primed to hear the gospel. Notice Luke doesn't next say "And then Paul crafted the perfect sermon and convinced them to believe in Jesus." No, he tells us "**The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.**", and she did. **That's good news.**

Salvation is God's doing. No one comes to faith because of you. People come to faith, because of God, through you. That's not harsh. It's freeing! One summer I worked for my friend's dad who owned a bathroom remodeling company. One day I swear he told me I needed to pull an old bathtub out of a bathroom we were working on. Now, old tubs weigh around 7 million pounds. So I grabbed that thing was trying to pull it away from the wall. After about 15 minutes I was exhausted and it had barely budged. He walked in and said, "What are you doing?!?" I told him I was moving the tub, and he said "You'll never do that by yourself. We will do it together." What a relief!

If we put ourselves at the center, we're going to think we have to convince people on our own, and we'll freeze. But that's not how it works. God invites us to partner with him where he's already working. **He's the one who moves 7-million-pound hearts from death to life, not us.** If you try to move it on your own, it won't budge. Just think of the believers in your life who, before they came to faith in Jesus, would have made a list of people least likely to ever do that. We might call that a miracle, because it is. God will do the saving. You share what you know and leave the rest up to him.

See how God at the center sets us free? "I don't know where to go." God says, "I'll guide you." "I can't bring people to faith." God says, "It's me who grants that." "I don't know what I'm going to face." Let's see what God says about that.

Acts 16:16-18 ¹⁶ As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." ¹⁸ And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

As they would go to the place of prayer, they kept encountering this possessed slave girl. Now, what she said was true, so you might wonder why Paul was annoyed. First, he didn't want his Jesus associated with the evil that possessed her. Additionally, she may have been preaching about a way of salvation, not the way, and some might have heard Most High God and thought of Zeus. Any association between the girl and the gospel would have been negative. Paul knew, and so did whatever spirit possessed her. That makes this spiritual warfare. So Paul, shows divine power over such forces and proclaims the God specifically tied to the work of Jesus by casting out the spirit in Jesus name. The girls owners will not be pleased and will have them beaten, stripped, and arrested.

When we talk of resistance to our faith, we often think of the disinterested, persecution, etc. But scripture is clear that we are in a spiritual battle. Ephesians says we don't wrestle against flesh and blood but against cosmic powers over this present darkness, spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places. If we decide to put God at the center and partner with him, we also put a target on our back, and on our own, we are toast. Now, we don't want to see the devil in every problem, but we also don't want to minimize this reality. **You are in a spiritual battle, but God is on your side.** Paul invokes the name of Jesus because it is the power of God that guards him here. I have been led to pray more prayers around spiritual warfare this month than in a while. Asking God to protect us in our relationships, decision-making, even technical stuff. We've had our monthly prayer meeting three times and had technical difficulties all three times. Bonez can't figure out what it is, and Bonez knows everything! This battle is real. If you are going to live your life for God, you will be in that battle. But God is on your side, and he will see you through to the end.

Acts 16:26-33 ²⁶ Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew

his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul cried with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” ²⁹ And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” ³¹ And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family.

Paul and Silas were thrown in jail and things are not looking good. But God moves in a way we have seen him move before: an earthquake. It caused all the doors to open and the prisoners' chains to fall off. It was the perfect opportunity to escape. The jailer believes they all have, which would have meant the death penalty for him, so he's going to take care of it himself. But Paul stops him and the jailer's life is changed forever. The one who had mistreated them before now comes to them on his knees asking what he must do to be saved. Paul has put God at the center so he sees this man as God sees him and sees this moment as an opportunity for the gospel. He's gives the answer "Believe in the Lord Jesus." He makes that decision, as does each person in his household. God takes a trial and turns it into a victory.

God will use dire circumstances to accomplish his will. **What we see as a roadblock may actually be a God-ordained detour to get you where, and with whom, you need to be.** If you partner with God, it won't go perfectly and there will be moments of great discouragement where you think you and your work are done. That goes for each of us individually and us collectively as the church. The Church, and our church, has been rocked this last year, and that was following two very difficult years for us. But what if God is using that to refine us and position us to be effective in what he has next for us? And what if he's shaking the earth right now to stir people up to ask, "What must I do to be saved?" **We are not in a time of hopelessness. We are in a time of hopeful anticipation.**

So what do we do with this? First, if you are asking the same question the jailer asked, what must you do to be saved, know the answer is the same. It is to believe in the Lord Jesus, that he died on the cross for you and took the punishment for your sins and was raised three days later in victory over sin and death. There is no earning it. You simply must believe it for yourself and you will be saved. See me, online host, or connecting center if you have made that decision or want to talk to someone about it

Worship. It's not go. It's not Next90. It's not build a life strategy. It's worship, because that's where it all begins. Your ministry is an overflow of your relationship with God. How do I know. In the midst of being in prison, look what Paul and Silas did **Acts 16:25 ²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.** Worship gives God the glory he is worthy of. Worship puts God in the center. In worship, we are reminded our God is infinitely good and wise and his plan is the best plan, and he will guide us. In worship, we are reminded that the one who draws sinners and Pharisees and the demon-possessed to himself can draw any dead heart to himself and grant salvation. In worship, we are reminded that the one who overcame the grave is more powerful than anything we will face in our life. He will guard us. And when we worship, we are reminded that the one who was

rejected used that rejection to reconcile us back to God. He can use whatever circumstances you encounter to grow the Kingdom through you.

And so let us all ask the questions “What is God up to? And how can I partner with him?”, but do so first through a heart of worship, putting God at the center.