

# “Do Your Part to Grow a Healthy Church”

*Acts 16:1-15*

Imagine we're going to take a survey this morning and the question before you is, what do you think is needed for Olivet to be a healthy growing congregation of Jesus' disciples? Think of that for a few seconds; write it down if you want.

Now the next question in the survey is, 'If this is what you feel our church needs to be a healthy growing church, what part are you willing to help accomplish that? It's one thing to sit back and say 'We need this and this' and it another to say I'm willing to help do this and this so we can keep growing and reach a few more people for Jesus.

In many places in the New Testament we are all challenged to be involved in helping our church grow. We are saved into the body of Christ universally and geographically in a smaller body to help fill our part of the world with the glory of God through the various gifts we each have as the Holy Spirit leads us.

Here in Acts 16:1-15, Paul and Silas leave Antioch (Syria) where they've been helping the church grow there for some suggest 3-5 years. Now they want to revisit the churches that Paul and Barnabas started a few years back and see 'How they are doing'. Paul and Barnabas argued about taking John Mark along who had deserted them on the first church planting trip. Barnabas will take Mark and go back to the island of Cyprus while Paul takes Silas and revisits the Galatian churches, going north on land this time, probably stopping in Tarsus for awhile, Paul's home town. Paul saw the need for continued spiritual health, to help churches grow and not just assume what they started has continued well.

So Paul and Silas do exactly what they set out to do. They strengthened the church. Which of course is a group of fellow believers. That reminds us of our responsibility in our own body of believers to ...

## **Strengthen Your Fellow Believers** **(16:1-5)**

Ch. 15:41 ends with

*He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.*

And after spending time back in Lystra and Derbe and town to town in that area, we read in 16:5

<sup>5</sup>*So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.*

This word for strengthen is interesting. It can be used to mean stabilize or grounded most of the time in a spiritual sense. But in Acts 3:15 it was used in a literal sense to help us get a better idea of what strengthen implies. In Acts 3 Peter and John healed the man crippled from birth. In v,16 when Peter has to defend what he did he says of this man,

<sup>16</sup> *By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.*

Before the crippled man was unable to stand. He had no foundation in which his legs could stand and give him direction. He now had strong foundation on which to stand and not be easily knocked over.

In another place we see 'strengthened' used in a slightly different sense. In Luke 9:51 we read *As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.*

The literal reading is sets his face toward Jerusalem. So this Greek word has the sense of building a strong foundation and remaining properly focused. So then, what does it means to strengthen believers in a church? Keep reaffirming and building on the foundation of our faith and keeping properly focused. All that is rooted in the teaching of Word of God with the focus of our lives living for the glory of God. How did Paul and Silas do that? We see 3 ways here. There are many more. But we see strengthening a church comes

### ***Through bold witnessing (v.1)***

It takes boldness to share your faith; especially when you go back and share the gospel where the last time you shared Jesus, they tried to kill you! Remember, Paul is returning to Lystra and Derbe. In Acts 14 he and Barnabas were in Lystra where Paul healed a crippled man almost the same way Peter had in Acts 3. The people of Lystra thought Paul and Barnabas were Greek gods and tried to worship them. Paul & Barnabas said 'No! We're here to tell you about the true God and His son Jesus.' Some Jewish legalists however, spread false information about Paul through the social media of their day and turned the people on them. They stoned Paul outside the city and thought they had killed him.

And now he went back there! That's bold. Now, a few years has gone by since then. And it doesn't seem Paul's enemies have followed him here. So Paul goes back and shares Jesus with others. It's not easy to share Jesus with people the first time, let alone subsequent times especially if they have rejected it outright, called you a fanatic or nut bar. But we must remain strong in our own foundation and stay focused ourselves on sharing the good news that Jesus loves and died for people so they can receive forgiveness of sins, new life in Christ and an eternal spot reserved in the new Jerusalem. We don't want people to die without Jesus; where a future of eternal torment awaits them. Let's pray for each other to boldly share the message again and again with those spiritually blinded by Satan. Pray what Peter and John prayed after being persecuted and arrested for sharing Jesus:

*Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. (4:29)*

While Paul and Barnabas had been gone, the church did grow. Here we read about a young man named Timothy, who in that time had grown spiritually to become a well-known leader in the church. Paul sees potential in Timothy (and others on his journeys). Part of Paul's strengthening process is

### ***Training potential leaders (16:1b-3)***

Timothy had a saved Jewish mother and grandmother but his father was a Greek. This seems to be well-known. Timothy, although Jewish, had never been circumcised, probably because of his

father. Paul knew Timothy was well-known and may not have been accepted in Jewish circles. Paul could see how that could hinder his testimony to Jewish people. So for witnessing reasons, Paul convinces Timothy that it would be helpful for his ministry. Has nothing to do with salvation and the decision reached in Acts 15. It was simply to help him be accepted in Jewish circles. Timothy understands and agrees. Shows maturity on his part and wisdom on Paul's part.

This part of strengthening one another; discipling them by helping them make good decisions that will build their testimony, helps mature people so they can become more responsible. It's interesting that only a few verses earlier Paul 'did not think it wise to take' Mark yet here wanted to take Timothy along the journey.' Paul's pattern was to establish churches and help them choose or train leaders who can give direction to the ministry.

That's an ongoing job and it can be formal and informal. Training leaders is essentially strengthening their foundation of faith and encouraging them to serve in areas of ministry where we sense God's gifting. Starts out with smaller responsibilities and moves to larger ones as we show we are capable in God's strength to serve in those areas. Asking people to help you is one of the simplest ways to helping each other mature in our giftedness.

And of course a steady diet of

### ***Edifying teaching (vv.4-5)***

Is essential. Paul and Silas

*delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey*

The decisions made in Jerusalem were about what did the Scriptures say about how one is saved and how faith in Jesus should show in your daily life. There needs to be growth, evidence that you are not following the ways of the world and are choosing to obey the teachings of God's Word. So strengthening believers comes through sharing the gospel together, discipling them and teaching them to obey the Word. Sounds a lot like what Jesus told the 11 to do in Matt. 28:19-20.

Paul and Silas move on. They probably revisited Pisidian Antioch (show map) and we read that they were prevented from going to Asia by the Holy Spirit. Asia, in Paul's day wasn't the Asia we're familiar with today. It was south west Turkey. Paul was planning on retracing his former journey but somehow the Spirit prevented them from going that way, so they went north instead towards Mysia where they wanted to go to Bithynia making it look like he would do a full circle and come back down in Tarsus area. But the Spirit prevented him from going north east and pointed them to the west, where they came to Troas. And while there Paul has a vision of a Greek man in Macedonia to come and share the gospel. Paul did not plan on going to Greece but was willing to go because it was clear the Spirit was leading.

So if we're to strengthen our own body of believers we need to, as Paul says in Galatians and modelled in his life,

## **Keep in Step with the Spirit** **(16:6-11)**

He uses that phrase in Gal. 5:25-26 when he says,

<sup>24</sup> Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

The opposite of being in step with the Spirit is selfish living. Living by the Spirit is obeying Jesus and living a life of sacrificing our own desires for his. Paul shows that to us here as he continued to teach God's Word, the Spirit directed him by closing doors. Keeping in step with the Spirit means

### ***Continually serving in dependence on God (vv.6-8)***

How did Paul know not to go certain places? Because as he was serving God in sharing the gospel, he was depending on God to lead him where God wanted him. Faith is not passive, it's active. Paul didn't sit around doing nothing waiting for God to direct him. Even that very familiar verse we all have memorized gives us that idea. Prov. 3:5-6 says

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

Acknowledge means trust, submit to God and He will make your paths straight. The path your already on He will make straight. As your obeying, moving, trusting He'll straighten the path by closing some options so that the path to take is more clear.

Paul is directed to Troas and the Spirit gives him a dream to go across the water to Greece. Paul goes because he has been trusting God and God has been making the path more straight and therefore he is

### ***Open to God's leading to new paths (16:9-11)***

Paul hadn't thought about going to a new country, but God was. Paul was obeying God as he sensed the need to revisit the churches he had previously started or ministered to. Yet in his obedience God says, Paul I need you to take the gospel to Greece, and he directs him there.

So, if we're desiring to obey God by serving Him in helping strengthen the body of Christ right here (or wherever He leads) and we're following the Spirit's leading when He closes some doors and opens others, then let's

## **Believe God Will Work! (16:13-15)**

When we're serving God faithfully, obeying and sharing His Word to strengthen ourselves and reach out to others, let's not forget to trust God to work! I think sometimes we do. We serve Him, doing what we feel He's showing us what to do, but because we don't always see immediate results we doubt God will actually make a difference. Because we are sometimes looking for big things when God says, we have to start small sometimes.

Paul and companions obey God. They end up in Troas, get this dream about a man calling them to Macedonia. They cross the straight, eventually coming to Philippi. A fairly major Roman city. Paul does what he always does; looks for the local synagogue. There isn't one there. Lord, there isn't even a synagogue here. You want us here? There's no synagogue because there aren't enough men to form one. You have to have a minimum of 10 Jewish men to form a synagogue. Paul made some

inquiries no doubt. 'No sir, there isn't a formal synagogue but some of the Jewish women (and a few men but not many) gather on the Sabbath down by the river where they sing and worship.

Undeterred Paul goes because he trusts God. He finds some women, asks permission if he can teach them the Word of God. They agreed.

*<sup>14</sup> One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.*

We need to believe God will work when we obey Him, even if it's only a few people. Believe God will ...

### ***Work in the hearts of those who hear (vv.13-14)***

I thought Paul had a vision of a Macedonian man who wanted him to come. Yes but because there weren't enough men following Jesus. God leads Paul to these women and Lydia in particular. Lydia, we are told is a dealer in purple cloth in the city of Thyatira. Purple cloth was hard to make and very expensive. Lydia was a widow or divorcee who was influential and dealt in the world of fashion for the wealthy. She gets saved. Her household (because she has servants) gets saved. They all get baptized too. Wow, God was working in ways Paul didn't expect. It may have all happened in the same day, or a few days. Then she says to Paul,

*When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.*

Why did God lead Paul to Philippi to meet Lydia who he would lead to Christ, along with many if not all in her household? Believe God will work

### ***In ways that will minister to you also (16:14-15)***

Sometimes the people you and I serve will end up serving us as well. Wherever Paul went he met new believers and led people to Christ. Some of these people would become leaders of house churches or be people of means who could help Paul out in his ministry or work alongside him. God knows Paul can't get to where he needs to go without the assistance of others as well. And I also purposely ignored something else because I wanted to mention it here.

As we've been reading this passage, in vv.1-8 the narrator has been speaking in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural. 'They travelled' (v.4), 'they came to the border of Mysia' (v.7), 'they went down to Troas' (v.8); After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.' (v.10)

The Holy Spirit directed Paul to Troas because Luke was there. And Luke joined their ministry at this point. Luke was a physician and would have served Paul and the churches wherever he went in that capacity but also as the recorder and writer of Paul's ministry experiences in the book of Acts. And last week who did we read was the only one who came to Paul when he was in prison awaiting his death sentence? "Only Luke is with me. Get Mark [Timothy] and bring him with you." (2 Tim. 4:11).

When you and I want to serve God by using our gifts to strengthen the believers here, believe God will not only work in other people's lives but these very same people will also encourage you and I when and where we need encouragement.

When Paul wrote his letter to the believers in Rome, he wrote in 1:11

<sup>11</sup> I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong— <sup>12</sup> that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

We're saved and joined into a local body. We're commanded in Heb. 3:12 to encourage one another every day so we're not hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. We strengthen one another by being obedient to God's Word, serving each other through our gifts so we grow spiritually. We encourage each other and strengthen ourselves when we share the gospel. We strengthen one another through prayer and biblical wisdom in discerning God's direction for our lives.

And every time we use our time, gifts and resources to strengthen and expand the body of Christ, God is glorified. And we do our part in helping God achieve His goal for the world, gradually filling our parts of the world with His glory.

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