

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Calm the Chaos 2*

To Listen

October 29, 2023

Acts 16:6-10 (NIV)

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' ¹⁰After 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.

Would you turn with me back to Acts, Chapter 16, the passage that was read for us? Acts 16, verses 6 - 10.

After God the Father raised Jesus up from the dead, among the last things He said to His disciples before He ascended – before He left the earth – were these words: *"I am sending you what my Father has promised, but stay in the city (in Jerusalem) until you have been clothed with power from on high."*¹

"Power from on high." That has a nice winsome ring to it, doesn't it?

Even if we didn't comprehend exactly what Jesus meant here, just to hear Him say, "power from on high is coming to you," is an attractive, positive notion, because things happen to us in life that we don't know how to handle, and we need help beyond ourselves to deal with them.

Did you hear, this week, about the semi-trailer truck – this is a true story – hauling pumpkins that caught on fire on the interstate, on I-5 somewhere near LA? Blew out the side of the trailer and spilled the pumpkins all over the road.

One of the busiest freeways in the world blocked by burning pumpkins with a thousand angry drivers behind you.

Gives new meaning to pumpkin spice, doesn't it?
Or pumpkin crisp?

I didn't even know pumpkins were flammable.

If you were that truck driver, in a situation like that, what on earth do you do?

You ask God for power from on high.

We've all been there. I don't mean with a truckload of burning pumpkins, but we've all been in some big mess of a situation – people upset with us. Maybe it was our fault – maybe not. Either way, about all we can do is to ask God for help – for "power from on high."

And even though we don't deserve it, sooner or later and in one way or another, God does help us. He either

turns the situation around or He gives us ability and wisdom beyond our own to handle it – to bear it.

We may not understand everything about what happened to us and why, but we know God's helped us and we carry on.

We can, however, understand Jesus' idea of "power from on high" because He explains it just after this.

In Acts 1, Jesus says, *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you."*

So, the *promise* of God the Father that Jesus sends to us is the Spirit of God Himself.²

And why does God promise – and Jesus send – the Spirit?

Because the Spirit comes to take over the role of Jesus in the world and especially in the lives of Christ-followers.

The Spirit comes to take Jesus' place on earth.

That's why Jesus told His disciples in John 16 that it is for our benefit that He returns to God the Father.³

You see, what *Jesus* could do for just a *few* disciples in His *humanity*, the Holy Spirit can do for *all*.

The *incarnate Jesus* could empower just a *few* disciples. But *God's Spirit* can empower *all* Christ-followers.

Jesus was deeply involved in the lives of just a *few*. The Spirit is involved in *all* our lives.

Jesus gave direction and guidance to a *few*; the Holy Spirit directs and guides *all*.

Jesus could only be in one place at a time. God's Spirit can be everywhere.

The Holy Spirit carries none of the human limitations that Jesus bore, which means He's unlimited.

God's Spirit can comfort those who suffer in Gaza and Israel and in Russia and Ukraine;

- at the very same time that He's speaking to our teens in Bowling Green;

- at the same time that He's guiding His followers in Washington DC and in Nevada and in Maine and in China;

- at the same time that He's receiving our worship here;

- at the same time that He's helping that pumpkin truck driver along the interstate in California;

- at the same time that He does a million other things for millions of other people.

Jesus didn't want His disciples to grieve for either Him or for themselves over His departure, because in His leaving earth and going back to the Father, everyone would benefit.

In the coming of God's Spirit, everyone benefits!

¹ Luke 24:49

² Acts 1:8

³ John 16:7

We see an example of this in our text here – how God’s Spirit led the apostle Paul to the people who needed him the most – to the people who were prepared and ready for God’s word and presence to be delivered to them.

In fact, this passage may be the most explicit example we have in the Bible of the ministry – and the leadership in particular – of God’s Spirit.

Paul was beginning his second mission trip.

Earlier in this chapter, we’re told how he and Silas traveled to Derbe and Lystra. There, they are joined by Timothy, and they experience God’s blessing of their work.

So, they continue on, making plans for their days to come, and, no doubt, their plans seemed good and reasonable to them.

But the plans they’d made were not altogether *God’s* plans.

Paul had probably just finished visiting the churches in Galatia, and given his deep desire to expand into more and more gentile territory, he likely wanted to go straight west toward Colossae and Ephesus.

But we’re told there in verse 6 that *“the Holy Spirit prevented”* his group from going in that direction – into the province of Asia.

That was the first – call it a nudge – pushback, a redirection of the Spirit, but not the last. There’s a whole string of them here.

God says, *“Not the province of Asia – not to the west,”* so they turn and head north. But when they get to the border of Bithynia – there comes another nudge, *“Don’t preach in Bithynia.”*

So, they turn and travel along the coast, finally arriving at the northwestern port city of Troas, where Luke joins the group. (We presume this because in this passage we get the transition of perspective from third person to first person.)

The book of Acts, up to here, is all about “they,” but in verse ten there, the perspective changes to, “we,” because now Luke, the author, includes himself.

Did God direct Paul so Luke could join the group?

Maybe, but we learn another reason through the Spirit’s next nudge.

Now, we’re not told how the Spirit “nudged” them, or spoke to them, in the previous times. We can only guess.

It could have been by the word of some prophet, or maybe a vision, or maybe through some deep, unmistakable conviction, or maybe some strange circumstance.

Certainly, if God can use a raging storm and a big fish to direct Jonah, or a flood to direct Noah, or a talking donkey to direct Balaam, what can’t He use?

We don’t know how the Spirit directed Paul the times before.

But here, we’re told explicitly that in Troas, Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia – the region to their

west, across the Aegean Sea. A Macedonian, standing and begging Paul, verse 9 there says, to, *“come over to Macedonia and help”* them.

So, after all the unknowns and maybe even disappointments of the previous weeks, God now reveals precisely the place where they were to go to speak of Jesus.

So, they made their preparations, caught a ship, and left immediately for Macedonia. They landed at the coastal city of Philippi, and there Paul proclaimed the good news of Jesus – the first time the gospel was preached on European soil.

And, of course, the rest is history.

This was all brought about by the leading of God’s Spirit.

Now, if we’re honest, we might admit that we find the Holy Spirit’s way of doing things frustrating at times, because He doesn’t typically tell us everything that will happen all at once.

He doesn’t typically say, “Go here, then here, then there and then over there,” or, “Do this, then this, then this, and afterward, do that.”

No. Almost always, all He gives us is the next step. He gives us a nudge in the right direction, and then when we obey that, he gives us another nudge, and on and on like that.

But, sooner or later, as we follow His usually gentle nudges, we find ourselves in a place where we see God do something amazing.

But here’s the thing about God’s Spirit’s nudges: we have to be able to hear them in order to recognize them for what they are. And that is hard to do when our lives are full of chaos and noise, when we’re buzzing here and there and always doing this and that or the other.

In order to be in the center of God’s will, we have to find a way to calm the chaos, in order to listen to God’s Spirit’s directions.

Now, it is true, of course, that God, on occasion, acts in ways that are big and bold and spectacular – ways that are hard to miss.

The exodus, the flood, the conquest of Canaan, the resurrection, the return of Jesus: things like that come to mind.

Things that big: those are hard to miss.

But far more often, God speaks and works in quiet ways that we can totally miss if we’re caught up in crazy schedules and unrealistic, unhealthy expectations.

If Noah had been always on Facebook, for example, he may have never heard God’s voice sparing him and his family.⁴

If Abraham had his headphones on during his walk up Mount Moriah, he may have wound up really sacrificing his son, Isaac.⁵

What if Moses was so into YouTube that he missed God’s plans for the Exodus? Or if Joshua was watching a football game and wasn’t really paying attention to

⁴ Genesis 6

⁵ Genesis 22

where God told him to take Israel, then instead of taking them to the *promised* land, He might have them to Disneyland? Or to Maryland?

Certainly, there are times when the Spirit works in blatant, unmissable ways.

But most of the time, He guides us far more subtly and quietly, and we have to be listening if we expect to get it right.

Maybe God doesn't seem to be very active in our culture in these days because maybe He can't find anyone who can hear Him talking to them?

And maybe that's true for us.

God's been trying to guide us, to nudge us, but maybe our lives are too crowded, our schedules too packed, our work too consuming, our leisure too important to us for Him to even get a hearing.

Too often, when life gets busy, it's our time with God that gets pushed out.

So, is it any wonder, really, that we have trouble hearing Him?

Is it any wonder that we find ourselves in messes that God may well have prevented if we had but listened for His guidance?

Even Jesus had to make listening to God intentional.

Over and over, we read about Jesus getting away from His, at times, totally chaotic schedule in order to find a quiet place to pray – to hear from God.

Mark 1:36 *"Early in the morning, Jesus got up and went off to a solitary place to pray."*

"At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place..."

Luke 4:42

"Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."

Luke 5:16

"Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God." Luke 6:12

"Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with Him..." Luke 9:18

"He took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray." Luke 9:28

"One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray..." Luke 11:1

"Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, to pray..." Luke 22:39

Going away to listen to his Father was a vital pattern in Jesus' life and one He wanted to demonstrate for His disciples, because He knows that's how we stay in God's will.

And that's why God sent His Spirit to us: to lead us as we'll listen to Him, as we'll make that space in our lives.

The fact is, in His gift of His Spirit, God has given us all we need to stay in His will. He wants to speak to us, to move and guide us, to nudge us where He'd like us to go.

But we have to calm the chaos in order to hear Him. We have to calm the chaos in order to listen.

Typically, He will not make Himself heard over the noise of our lives. He will not shout at us. That's not His way.

And let me say too, it's not our place to tell Him how He needs to speak with us. We try to do that sometimes, don't we? But that's *His* call to make, *not* ours.

It's been a challenge to work with some of our African refugee churches; there are so many language and cultural differences. Some of them just don't get the importance of legal and financial things here in the states, and sometimes willingness is a big part of it.

At one meeting, one of their pastors, who was rather frustrated, told Supt. Lane, "You need to start thinking more like an African."

John replied, "But you're not in Africa. You're in America now, and the rules of American society are what apply here, which means, if you want to succeed here, it's you who has to start thinking like an American."

If we want God's guidance and wisdom to influence our lives, to keep us on His track in life's big and small things, and if we want His power from on high to bless and direct our lives, then we have to put ourselves in positions to listen – to hear Him according to the way He chooses to speak and guide.

And if He is a God who leads and guides in subtle, personal ways (and He is), then we have to calm the chaos to catch the messages.

Is this a need in your life today: to find some way to calm the chaos, to simplify the schedule, to quiet the craziness, so that you can more carefully and thoroughly hear the Spirit's voice and guidance?

Hey, there's no shame in admitting life has just gotten too busy and that we need to figure out how to make more margin. There's no shame at all in admitting that, and even admitting that we need help to accomplish that.

What *is* a shame is when we *don't* admit it and don't do something about it, and just keep on missing the Spirit's voice and leading.

So, is this the time? Has the time come to get serious about calming the chaos and reshuffling the schedule in order to hear the nudges of the Spirit?

If you know this is something you need to do, make that commitment to the Lord today. If you want to make it in a more of public way, or if you'd like someone to pray for you in doing that, you're welcome to come and kneel here and we'll just pray for you.

To listen to God's voice,

to live by the leading of His Spirit,

to receive the "Power from on High" that God promised and that Jesus has sent: that's essential to living the victorious Christian life.

Will you calm the chaos so you can receive the gift?

Closing Prayer:

Lord, it's like the proverb says, "*In our hearts we plan our course, but you determine our steps.*"⁶

We want You to lead our lives, but we realize that we have to be able and willing to listen. So right here and now, would you point out anything in our lives that's blocking our ability to hear to you, so we can be led by your Spirit into the places and situations and lives that you have for us. Amen.

Closing Song: *Christ, Be my Leader*

Benediction:

I'm so glad Luke did not just skip this little account here of Paul's direction and re-direction. Maybe he considered it because it's a bit revealing; some might think it's even compromising in ways—looking at it as a sort of failure of Paul's.

But it wasn't. Not at all.

The failure would have been if Paul had not taken the time to listen and then do as the Spirit said to do.

All material may be freely used where needed and helpful, but in the interest of integrity, please note the source.

⁶ Proverbs 16:9