

Acts 16:1-10 Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. ² The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. ³ Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴ As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. ⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

⁶ 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. ⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ 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.

Go Crazy for the Gospel

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Acts 16:1-10

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Dear Church,

Paul, Silas and Timothy are going crazy for the gospel. And what about you and me? Oh, I suspect they'd go crazy for you and me too 😊. But I mean are **we** going crazy for the sake of the gospel? Have you gone to any lengths for Jesus' sake—to make his name and salvation known? Maybe you have but you don't realize it; it's just a normal part of your life. You just do what you do as you live for Jesus. Maybe you aren't even sure what going crazy for the gospel might look like for you? Clearly it is different for everyone.

In fact, we see two very different crazy things that happen in our Bible reading today. Both serve to advance the gospel. The first was circumcision and the second was obeying the Spirit's leading to go to a new place. Both these things were done out of a desire to spread the gospel. So as we get started, maybe ask yourself, "Is the Lord pressing anything on my heart... something I can do for the sake of letting others know about the love of Jesus? Is the Lord pressing anything on my heart lately, something I can do for the sake of letting others know about the love of Jesus?"

A Heart that Craves Doing God's Will

What we see in Acts 16 in the life of Paul and his partners—Silas and Timothy—is, first of all, a heart that craves to do God's will. These disciples are doing what is needed to be the aroma of Christ, to bring the light of Jesus into darkness, to bring the seasoning salt of the gospel to the ends of the earth, to advance God's desire to bring the good news of salvation to the Gentile world as well as to the Jews.

To that end, it could be argued that one of the craziest things that Timothy does is to get circumcised for the sake of the gospel. This seems all the more crazy in context. Looking back to Acts 15 we find the Jerusalem Council declaring strongly and clearly that circumcision is not necessary for Christians. It was a unanimous decision that brought great unity and joy to the churches. So it seems crazy to read in the very next chapter that Paul had Timothy circumcised.

“What’s going on here?” we can rightly ask. I don’t know about you, but I have all kinds of questions about this. I kind of wonder how they policed that, don’t you? Who was checking for foreskins at the front door of the synagogues? It’s kind of funny to think about that but I’m sure the Jews had that figured out. That’s just an interesting sideroad I won’t go down right now. But I will ask a connected and more important question.

The main road here is why? Why would Paul fight hard against requiring circumcision for the Gentiles and then do such a thing to Timothy? I don’t have time to go into great detail about Paul’s words to the Galatians. I encourage you to read that for yourself later today. But make no mistake about it, in his letter to the Galatian churches, Paul pounds home the truth that we are saved by grace alone. To that end, he vehemently opposes the circumcision party that said non-Jews must be circumcised to be true Christians.

His strongest and most graphic words come in Galatians 5:12 where he writes this:

Gal 5:12 As for those agitators (the circumcision party insisting on circumcision for all Christian men; Paul says), I wish they would go all the way and emasculate themselves.

Ouch! Paul is not holding back here! If you need a translation, he’s saying, “Why stop at the foreskin? Keep going. Take the knife and cut the whole thing off!” These might be some of the most angry and graphic words in the New Testament. They leave no doubt about Paul’s position lining up with the Jerusalem council. Stop insisting on circumcision for Gentiles! That’s law. In Christ, we live by grace alone!

We wonder, then, why Acts 16:3 says that he had Timothy circumcised? What’s going on? Is Paul waffling? Is he feeling pressure from his former Pharisee colleagues to insist on circumcision for Greek Christians after all? Absolutely not.

The reason for Timothy’s circumcision is so that Jewish Christians will not take offense to Timothy when he comes into their synagogues. In fact, he wouldn’t be welcome in their synagogues. No one is under the illusion that this was a forced circumcision. Of course not. This was Timothy’s choice. And he did it for the sake of the gospel. He wanted to be free to enter any Jewish synagogue without causing offense to the Jews so that he could preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and salvation by grace alone!

Pardon the pun, but clearly and literally, Timothy has skin in the game! We use that saying in English to communicate that someone is heavily invested. In this

case, Timothy is willing to do something which is considered crazy by some because he loves Jesus and wants to do what he can to advance the gospel. He's invested! Timothy reasons that a couple of days of pain is worth it if he can have a lifetime of access to Jewish synagogues.

This just begs the question for us, "What can or would we give up so that others would be more receptive to hearing our story of Jesus' love for us? What skin do we have in the game? Timothy played the game of the Jews. He was fully aware of salvation by grace alone. He knew it. He believed it. He was comforted by it. He was securely saved by Christ! Now he's eager to do whatever he can to get the good news out to Jews wherever he and Paul and Silas might go!

The second evidence of these evangelists' eagerness to do God's will is their willingness to go to great length to obey the leading of the Holy Spirit and to live with uncertainty until his leading is clear. When we read verses 6-10, we can easily miss it but Paul, Silas and Timothy travelled on foot. Sometimes for days, if not weeks, without a clear understanding of their next step. Just listen to those verses again and **look at the map** as you do.



See the little scale on the bottom of the map where it shows how much 200 miles and 200 kms is? Now look and listen.

--V.6: *they travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from entering Asia.* The best guesses we have are that they travelled the route marked by the arrows and question marks. If they started in Derbe and bumped around the borders mentioned, that's about 400km.

--V.7: *When they came to the border of Mysia, they **tried** to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.* Maybe another 200kms.

--V.8: *So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.* Again, at least another 200km.

Then comes vv.9 & 10: The Spirit finally reveals the Lord's plan and they go from Troas to Macedonia—by boat.

To us those are just names of places. But to Paul and his friends, this represents walking on foot for hundreds of kilometers. It's a few weeks' worth of walking. This is trust and obey while waiting for a door to open. It is hitting a brick wall over and over until the Holy Spirit says, "Yup, this is it! Go!" That's no small thing. Here you are ready and willing to spread the gospel but it's like God is letting you wander around for weeks. And not just sitting comfortably at home but literally wandering around day after day.

Can you imagine the conversations Paul and his friends had at the end of the day? There wasn't any, "Wow! That was a good day. I really feel like we made good headway today!" No! It was more like, "Well, guys, I'm not sure where the Lord is leading us. He just keeps slamming doors in our face. We might as well be walking in circles!"

I really don't know how the Holy Spirit was talking to them. The reading seems to point to it being a rather slow and discerning process just like it often is for us to follow the Lord's leading. You must pray and wait. Pray and act in good faith. We often say ourselves too that a door opens or closes. It is a matter of praying and discerning. We listen to promptings in our heart or mind that we believe come from the Lord. We talk to other believers whom we trust and see if they confirm our sense of God's leading. Sometimes we move forward but a door closes. We can't get a travel document, or we don't have money or something like that. One way or another, the Holy Spirit closes the door for us. But then, like Paul and his friends, we conclude through a series of events—like they did in v.10—that God is clearly giving us a green light and calling us to do something. So we get going.

I love that the Holy Spirit allows us to know this part of the story. I think it's given for our sakes as we seek to share the gospel and live for Christ in our day. It's like he's saying to us too, "Don't be surprised when you feel like your life isn't making any impact for a time. Don't worry when your life changes dramatically and doors close. It's not like the Holy Spirit couldn't have immediately shown Paul and his companions that Macedonia was their mission field. Instead, he let them wait

and wonder, pray and search. They had to learn to follow. They had to remember to trust and obey even when a door gets slammed-closed by the Spirit of Jesus.

I will always remember being in the blistering hot sun of the Sinai Desert 5 years ago. Our leader taught us an important lesson about Israel's time—40 years no less—in the wilderness. He said they spent the whole time learning to trust God's voice and leading. When the pillar of fire or the cloud moved, they moved. When it stood still, they stood still. It was often weeks, months and even years between moves. But all of that prepared them for next step—going into the Promised Land where they would have to do the same thing. Trust the Lord's leading. Walk around Jericho 7 times. Just shout and watch the Lord give you the land. Trust and obey, no matter how crazy it seems!

Paul and his companions had skin in the game in a whole different way. They invested themselves in the spread of the gospel. They are like racehorses locked behind the starting gate, just chomping on the bit, waiting for the Holy Spirit to open the gate so they can run the race. But they have to wait on the Lord until he is ready to let them move forward. In the meantime, he is doing things in their hearts and lives, teaching them to wait, to trust, to listen, to obey.

Anyway, we have the story of these followers of Jesus who are eager to do God's will. They are willing to sacrifice personal comforts, give up time and money, endure miles in the hot sun while travelling on foot for weeks so that they can share the good news of salvation in Christ with people in their world. And God used them. That's the **first** takeaway for us.

God Can Use Us

Secondly—and this point is much shorter than the first 😊 and it's the last point—God can use us too to spread the gospel in our world. Do you believe that? Does that sound exciting to you? Does it maybe sound crazy?

Clearly, it isn't always easy. Our lives are different than those of Paul, Silas and Timothy but God is not different. He still works through things like closed doors and waiting—in order to prepare us for the next important step in our lives. You and I can live confidently in the comfort that as we seek to follow the Lord's leading through our life, he'll get us where we need to be and use us as his instruments. Yes, he can use us to share his love in Christ in our own way, ways that he has ordained for us.

We face a culture that is probably almost the opposite of those who Timothy was going to. He had to conform to their culture in order to reach them. He got circumcised so he would not offend their spiritual sensitivities. Our culture is probably more like the Greek world. People will more than likely mock our desire to practice certain religious rituals or traditions or refrain from certain activities because we are Christians. Timothy was eager and willing to join the Jewish ritual in order to be able to associate with the Jews. People in our day more often than not think that Christians won't associate with them because we think we are better

than them. I trust that this is not how we really think but it is still very possible that our actions send that sort of message, even if we don't intend to do so.

So maybe we have to ask ourselves what personal comforts we can sacrifice for the sake of **sharing** the gospel with our neighbours? What things make us seem unapproachable to our neighbours today? As I'm reading this story of Timothy, I'm starting to think about what I might need to give up in order to meet my neighbours on their turf or on their terms. I begin to wonder if my lifestyle or words to my neighbours come across as welcoming or as distancing. I think of Pharisees in Jesus' day who gave off such an air of arrogance that people stayed away from them. Then I think of Jesus who met neighbours on their turf, touched people's lives where their need really was and didn't worry about breaking the Pharisees' legalistic rules. Instead, he helped people with his loving actions. And that's something that may seem crazy to us. It may move us out of our comfort zone but we do it for the sake of the gospel of our beloved Lord Jesus.

When it comes to sacrificing, the thing that probably comes to mind for most of us rather automatically is our money and time. Some people say things like, "It was such a sacrifice to give up our vacation this year because of covid-19." But let's be honest; that isn't really a sacrifice. That is just a trade-off or delay. If we had money saved up for a vacation but couldn't go on the trip, we still have the money to spend at a later date and the time off is still available. That's not sacrifice.

A sacrifice would be forfeiting a vacation and sending the money to a mission project. Equally valid, it could be trading in vacation tickets for time to help hurting people. I'm not saying that we should never have a vacation. The Lord commands us to rest as well. And that's a real gift from the Lord. But this Covid year has probably taught many of us that staying home or closer to home can be just as restful as more exotic trips. Sometimes even more restful. How often don't we come home from a trip more tired than when we left?

Anyway, think about how you could sacrifice money or time for the sake of the gospel. Pray about it. In fact, sacrificing time to simply pray for our neighbours is a huge part of sharing the gospel. We need people who are praying for the Holy Spirit to open hearts and to lead and guide us all. The unseen prayer partners are where it all starts! Then we must listen to and follow the lead of the Holy Spirit. Be patient and wait on the Lord. Maybe talk to other friends about things you might be able to do together. See what the Holy Spirit puts on your hearts.

When I think of sacrifice, I think of some of our seniors who are always concerned about having money for an organization like World Renew. Sacrificing temporary comforts in this life to show the love of Christ to the hurting world is on their minds a lot. It's beautiful. One woman said she'd give up time down south in the winter so she could give more time and effort to ministry at home. Others go south and spend a lot of their time furthering the cause of the gospel there in their words and deeds so that people come to know Jesus.

How we show concern for others in our day to day life is equally or more important. How do we sacrifice for the sake of the gospel even when it seems crazy to others? I know some bosses will do your utmost—sacrifice even your own pay cheque—in order to keep your workers on the payroll when times are tough as they have been this year. It might be easier and financially safer to lay people off, but these employers love their workers and don't want to see them hurting so they tighten up their budgets for the good of everyone. This concern shows the love of Christ.

There are companies and individuals who, likewise, take a look at their books as the year wraps up. They see how the Lord has blessed them and, rather than putting the profits in their pocket, they write a cheque to the church, World Renew or the Mosaic Centre or some other kingdom cause that extends the gospel's reach. These people have skin the game. They are invested in the gospel's advancement.

Whether we are older or young, we can use our time, talents, treasures or anything else to advance the gospel. Ask the Lord how he wants to use you. Keep praying and waiting until the door opens. He will lead and guide you just as he did Paul and his companions.

The bottom line, friends, is that Timothy and Paul and Silas had a heart to do the Father's will. They wanted the name of Jesus to spread. They were partners, walking hand in hand with the Lord himself, as he led them forward. Sometimes he brought them to a closed door and they had to wait. Eventually, the Lord always opened a way and they walked forward in faith to share the gospel.

May we live similarly—ready to sacrifice whatever the Lord puts on our hearts, no matter how crazy it might seem to others—so that the gospel advances. Let us rest in the Holy Spirit's leading and know that we can trust his direction.

I don't read anywhere that Timothy or Paul or Silas ever felt their sacrifice was a mistake or a waste. No, they considered it pure joy. It blessed their hearts and filled their lives with eternal purpose and joy as they partnered with Holy Spirit in bringing the good news of Jesus to their international neighbours.

So, go on. Get crazy for the gospel. Give what the Spirit of Jesus puts on your heart. Don't be afraid to sacrifice. Then watch as the Lord fills your life with eternal purpose and joy too.