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GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND MISSIONS  
Acts 16:6-10

Have you ever stepped back from your busy life of family, work, school and church and asked yourself, "What is God doing in this world?" When you ask this question, perhaps you sense your limitations and think you are just an insignificant speck in the total picture of God's plan and you say, "Who am I and what can I really do in the vast plan of God?" Since you see yourself as an insignificant part of God's plan, it is hard to understand what God is doing in the world.

You must grasp that God has not abandoned this world. He is doing a mighty work and we need to be aware of that work. God's Spirit is moving in this world as never before in history and we need to be thinking and moving with the Spirit of God, asking God what significant place we have in the plan for the world. Rest assured, God is still adding to the church those He wants saved. (Acts 2:47b: **"And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."**).

Most missions messages emphasize the responsibility of man to make missions happen, so that much is said about commitment, prayer, giving, and sharing the faith. All these things are important and needed, but we also need to get a perspective of God's sovereignty in world missions. We need to understand that God's plan for this world is right on schedule and when the last elect person is saved, then Christ will return to this earth.

Most of us can see the sovereign hand of God in our lives individually. Why were you born? Why were you born to certain parents and of a certain race? Why were you born in a certain country? All of these were done to you in God's sovereignty and you had no choice.

The next question is why have you heard the gospel of Christ when billions have never heard it? Why are you a Christian when billions reject

the gospel? You say, “I believed in Christ.” But why did you believe? Ultimately you must trace the cause of your salvation back to God, who is sovereign, saving whom He pleases, when He pleases and where He pleases.

What is true of individuals is also true of nations. God has sovereign control over the countries of the world (Psa. 115:3 **“Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.”** Dan. 4:35 **“All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: ‘What have you done?’”**). God seems to work more strongly in certain countries at different times in history just because He is God, carrying out His plan for this world.

Acts 16:6-10 is probably the strongest passage in scripture showing how God deals with nations as well as individuals. It is impossible to understand this passage unless you are unreservedly committed to the total sovereignty of God in every facet of life.

## **GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY**

**Acts 16:6 “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.”**

Paul and his missionary team of Silas and Timothy fully intended to preach the gospel in Asia Minor and in the great cultural and political center of the city of Ephesus, but the Holy Spirit stopped them.

How the Holy Spirit stopped them we are not told. Perhaps there was a vision, or a dream. Maybe there was persecution. Most likely they had a deep inner leading of the Spirit that this was not God’s timing to reach Asia Minor. We do know that Paul and others later did go to Asia Minor with the gospel, but it was not God’s will to go there then.

There were millions of lost Gentiles in Asia Minor and Paul and his team had the gospel, which alone could save them. Why didn’t God send them there? I don’t know, except to say it was not God’s will at the time. It was God’s will for Paul to go to Europe with the truth of Jesus Christ.

This verse tells us that logic and need do not necessarily constitute a missionary call. There were millions in Asia Minor who needed Christ and it was logical to go there. Yet God had other plans to sovereignly direct Paul and his team to Europe.

**Acts 16:7 “When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.”**

The missionaries had been forbidden to go south to Asia Minor, and so they logically looked now to the north, to Bithynia, which is modern-day Turkey, but again they were stopped.

Notice that Paul was not rebuked because he tried to go to Bithynia, but the Spirit simply said no. It was not the Spirit’s timing to go to these people. Surely this indicates that Paul had no peace about going south or north and he came from the east. This left only the west and it was either cross over into Europe or go home. Yet, Paul did not assume that this was where God wanted them and he did not presume on the sovereignty of God. He continued to pray and moved westward, not knowing the clear will of God, but moving out in obedience.

If we could have interviewed Paul at that time, we might have asked, “Paul, where are you going?” And his reply would have been, “I don’t know but I am moving forward on what understanding I have.” Paul knew God was leading him but he didn’t know where. He waited on God, probably in deep prayer, while moving westward waiting for further directions. God would give Paul clear direction when he needed it but not a moment before.

David Livingstone, the great explorer and Christian missionary to Africa, wrote in one magnificent sentence what should be the desire of us all: “I will go anywhere—provided it be forward.”

There is a great theological question which should arise in the mind of the careful reader of this passage. Why did the Holy Spirit forbid Paul to speak the gospel in Asia Minor and Bithynia? Was it that the Europeans were worthier than the Asians? No, for all men are guilty sinners before a holy God. Was it that God knew the Europeans would believe and the Bithynians would not, so He sent the Word where it would bear the most fruit? No, because God’s foreknowledge of events is always based on His

plan. Was it that God hated the Asians more than the Europeans or loved the Europeans more than the Bithynians? No, for God loves and hates whom He pleases.

Why then? We don't know except that it was God's purpose and the Holy Spirit has a master plan of evangelism, and He brings the gospel to individuals, nations and continents according to His sovereign timetable.

**Acts 16:8 “So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.”**

Still not knowing the will of God, Paul moved further westward in faith, probably scratching his head about God's specific leading, even though he never doubted God was in control or his call to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

**Acts 16:9 “During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’”**

At the precise moment in God's plan, God gave Paul clear direction as to the will of God for him and his missionary team. Paul saw a vision. He received the Macedonian Call to preach to Europe—to Greece, the cultural center of the world and then ultimately to Rome, the political center of the world.

**Acts 16:10 “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.”**

This call—long after Paul was dead and with the Lord—would make it possible to take the gospel to all of Europe. If your ancestry is European, as mine is, we need to realize our ancestors were filthy, dirty heathen who worshipped idols, but the gospel of Christ and its effects upon culture changed all that. We of European background should be so thankful God sent the message of the gospel westward to the European nations.

God has always dealt with nations from the beginning of the church (Acts 1:8 **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on**

**you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”)**

The gospel went to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. It spread out to nations around the Mediterranean, so that in one time in history Alexandria in North Africa was the hub of Christian activity. These nations were given gospel opportunity, but in time turned from it. The gospel then went to European nations: France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and many others. For centuries they had gospel opportunity and turned from it, so that today the gospel influence is minimal in Western Europe. The gospel then spread to England and that nation became a powerhouse for Christ and the modern missionary movement. England had gospel opportunity and turned from it, so that less than 5% of Britain is Christian. There are more Muslims in England today than Baptists.

The gospel then came to North America, namely America and Canada. America became the hub of Christian activity. In 1776, only 5% claimed to be born again Christians. At the Civil War the figure was 12%. At the beginning of this century, 25% claimed to be Christian. In 1977, it was estimated that 40% of America claimed to have received Christ as Savior. We now know these numbers are declining rapidly as our nation becomes more secular and materialistic.

About 92% of Americans believe in some kind of a God but very few claim to be born again and have a personal relationship with Christ. In America, the basic religion is New Age philosophy, which puts forth a God who accepts all religions, and all people are going to heaven. The religion of America is relativistic, pluralistic and syncretistic and it is rapidly becoming anti-Christian and Anti-Christ.

Gospel opportunity has come to the nation of America and we are turning from it. Only a mighty revival will turn this country from spiritual disaster.

Because of missionary efforts from England and especially from America, the gospel has spread around the world. God has multiple millions of Christians in the nations of Africa. In fact, the hub of Christianity may once again shift away from North America to Africa. God is also powerfully moving in the nations of South America. God is getting ready to reach the nations of Asia primarily through South Korea, which is probably

the most Christian nation on earth. Koreans are training thousands of missionaries to go into China, Japan and Southeast Asia, when God completely opens the doors to these nations.

In China today, apart from missionaries, there are at least 50 million Christians. Gospel opportunity is coming to these Third World nations but will they spurn it also? The last great block of people to be reached are the Muslim nations and even now there is some break-through with individual Muslims. However, God has not yet opened the door to the Muslim nations, which have 800,000,000 people in them, most of who have never heard the gospel of Christ. Will God send gospel opportunity to these Muslim nations? I believe He will and when it happens, God's people somewhere in this world will be ready to be missionaries to these people.

You may be thinking, "How is God going to bring the gospel to the Muslim nations? They are not only non-Christians, they are anti-Christian!" I don't know how, but God will do something. Whoever dreamed that the Communist nations of the world (Russia, East Germany and Eastern Europe), comprising over 500,000,000 people, who were anti-Christian to the core, would fling their doors wide open to the gospel, so that today Russia and the Ukraine are asking for Christians to come and teach Christian values in their public schools? Surely God is giving gospel opportunity to Russia and the Eastern European nations.

A few years ago, we all were glued to the TV screen as we saw the Berlin Wall torn apart piece by piece. Someday, we will stand in amazement and watch the Muslim countries open their doors to Christian missionaries. They may not be America missionaries but they will be from some country in the world which is taking full advantage of the gospel opportunity God is giving them.

## **CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY**

God is sovereignly, powerfully and supernaturally at work in this world as never before in the history of mankind. Whenever God chooses to work, He works through people. God will use Christians to get His work done on this earth. He gives you and me the privilege of praying for the lost in the world, to give our monies to further the gospel of Christ in the world

and to reach as many people in the world as we can by telling them the good news of salvation in Christ.

A true Christian is a world-Christian and is interested in seeing individuals and nations all over the world come to Christ. To know Christ is to have a vision for the lost world. Any church which is not missionary minded will die.

Count Zinzendorf, the founder of the Moravian Brethren, said it well: "That land is henceforth my country which most needs the gospel." If nationalistic pride in any way keeps us from being world-Christians, then we must kill our pride and see a world desperately in need of Christ, a world which will perish for all eternity in hell without a Savior.

The massive population explosion of our day seems to make the task of world evangelism impossible. In any given 24-hour period, the United Nations tells us there is a net gain of 178,000 in world population. How can we keep up? How can we do this task of reaching the whole world? We can't! God can! We must be faithful to pray, to witness, to give of our resources to world evangelization one step at a time, one task at a time, one person at a time. Be faithful where you are and God will expand your horizons. Christ has commanded us to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every person (Mark 16:15 **"He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.'"**)

If He commanded, surely He will grant the grace to do it. Will you be obedient to your Lord, King and Master and Supreme Commander?

Dr. Wilder, a dynamic missionary leader in India, was dining with three British naval officers. During the course of the conversation one of the officers remarked, "Why don't these missionaries stay at home and mind their own business?"

Dr. Wilder replied, "Suppose you were ordered to take your battleship to Constantinople tomorrow, would you choose whether to obey or not?"

The officers retorted, "If we are ordered to go, we must go, even if every ship is sunk and every sailor killed."

"Quite right," said the missionary. "I have orders from the divine government: 'Go and preach the gospel to every creature.'"

Any individual Christian and any local church which is not missionary minded—witnessing at home and making efforts to see that the gospel gets to the world—will die spiritually. What kills missionary zeal?

1. When we love money more than Christ.
2. When we want comfort more than spiritual warfare.
3. When we believe that all men are not sinful and are not headed for eternal judgment.
4. When we think God will not judge those who have never heard the gospel.
5. When we think the death of Christ is not sufficient to save all the world
6. When we are committed to having the clergy do the evangelization of the world.

The growth of Christianity in the early centuries was phenomenal. By the second century, one of the church fathers said, “We are everywhere. We are in your towns and in your cities; we are in your army and navy; we are in your palaces; we are in the senate; we are more numerous than anyone.”

By AD 300 the church was spreading so fast that it appeared the entire civilized world would be evangelized by AD 500. But something devastating happened to the Christian movement.

Constantine, the Roman emperor, supposed to have become a Christian, decreed that every one in the empire was already Christian. And slowly the idea prevailed of a division between laity and clergy, for pagans could not evangelize nor know how. This decree checked the mightiest movement for Christ in the history of the church.

You cannot be a well-balanced Christian and not be a world-Christian. To be a Christian is to have a heart for the good news of Christ’s salvation spread around the world. To be a Christian is to be committed to world evangelism in obedience to the Great Commission: “And repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47).

When I left England, my hope of India’s conversion was very strong; but amongst so many obstacles, it would die, unless upheld by God. Well, I have God, and His Word is true.

Though the superstitions of the heathen were a thousand times stronger than they are, and the example of the Europeans a thousand times worse; though I were deserted by all and persecuted by all, yet my faith, fixed on the sure Word, would rise above all obstructions and overcome every trial. God's cause will triumph. (William Carey, the father of modern missions)