**The Dispensations They Are A-changin’**

(Acts 16:6-11)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

A man who knew next to nothing about cars took his vehicle to a mechanic for an oil change one day. When the mechanic was finished, he told the man, “You know, it looks like your headlight fluid needs changing as well.” The man replied, “Okay, I guess you might as well—wait a minute! My headlights don’t have fluid. You’re trying to take advantage of me!” The mechanic sheepishly replied, “You got me, I’m sorry. But your tires really do need rotating.” The man answered, “You’re not fooling me. My tires rotate all by themselves!”

Speaking of *changing* things—like your oil, or your headlight fluid—the Book of Acts is a *book* of change. It records the dispensational change from God’s kingdom program for Israel to His *grace* program for us in the Body of Christ. And here in our text in Acts 16, we’re going to see proof of just how *much* things have changed. Speaking of Paul and his helpers, we read:

**“Now when they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia” (Acts 16:6).**

As you know if you know the Book of Acts, Paul is out preaching the gospel of the grace of God here, and as he’s deciding where to *go* to preach it, the Holy Spirit of God *refused* to allow him to go to preach it in Asia.

Now we’re not told *how* he forbad him. Maybe He spoke audibly aloud, or maybe He spoke in a vision, as he does later in this passage. All we know for sure is that the Spirit *doesn’t* speak to us in those ways *today.* If you’re hearing voices, I recommend you seek professional help, for you have a seriousproblem. And if you think you’ve heard from God in a *dream,* I’ll say what Ebenezer Scrooge said to that first ghost—that whatever you saw, it was probably caused by a bit of undigested beef from the supper you had the night before. That’s because now that the change from the kingdom program to God’s grace program is complete, the Spirit speaks only through the *Book* that He wrote, and *not* audibly or in visions.

But here we have to ask why the Spirit didn’t want Paul to preach the gospel in Asia. And to answer that question, it helps to remember that two years later Paul *did* preach the gospel in Asia, and

**“*all they which dwelt in Asia* heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10).**

Here I should add that when the Bible talks about “Asia,” it’s talking about what we call Asia *Minor,* a small section of Asia, and not the vast continent that we think of when we think of Asia. But if all of Asia *eventually* heard the gospel, how come the Spirit didn’t want Paul to preach in Asia in our text in Acts 16?

The answer to *that* question has to do with *how* Paul was preaching here. He was just going from one small town to the next, as we’ve seen him doing in our studies, and all of Asia was *never* going to hear the gospel that way!

Of course, that prompts the question: “Then how did Paul do it in Acts 19:10?” Well, in the *context* of that verse, it says of Paul that

**“...he...separated the disciples, *disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus.* And this continued by the space of two years; *so that*** **all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:9,10).**

Paul took his disciples to a *school,* and taught them for two years—and *disputed* with the men who *disagreed* with what he was teaching those disciples. That ended with *them* becoming disciples as Paul overpowered their arguments, and then they all went out *together* to all corners of Asia. With that many men doing the preaching, it wasn’t long before “all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus.” And hey, isn’t that how the gospel goes out today? Men go to Bible school, or train in their home churches, and become pastors and missionaries, and then they go out to all corners of the world with the gospel.

So in forbidding Paul to go to Asia *here,* the Spirit was trying to get Paul to realize that *he couldn’t reach the world alone.* He was trying to get him to examine what he was doing *and improve on* what he was doing. And that’s what God expects us *all* to do as adult sons of God.

Remember, God *sees us* as adult sons, and He expects us to *act* like adult sons. That’s what the Bible doctrine of *adoption* is all about. It’s based on how Jewish boys in those days were adopted in a ceremony known in our day as a bar mitzvah. When that day came, the boy became an adult son in the eyes of his father, and he had to start making his own decisions, and quit listening for the voice of his father to tell him what to do every step of the way in life.

And the day you got saved, God adopted *you!* Our apostle Paul told the Galatians,

**“God sent forth His Son...that we might receive *the adoption of sons*. And...*ye* are sons” (Galatians 4:4-6).**

God’s purpose in sending His Son to earth was “that” you might receive the adoption of sons. And now, as Paul says, “ye *are* sons,” just as those Jewish boys became sons. That means now *you* have to make your own decisions, instead of listening for the voice of *your* Father telling *you* what to do every step of the way in life.

You say, “Wait a minute! What about all the Asians who *died* in the two years it took Paul to get to Asia and start teaching the Lord’s disciples in that school?” If that’s your concern, you can put it to rest. You see, all those in Asia had *already* heard the *kingdom* gospel. They heard it from the Jews how heard it at Pentecost, and brought it *back* to Asia with them. Luke gives us a description of what happened at Pentecost in Acts 2, where we read:

**“Jews...out of every nation under heaven....dwellers in Mesopotamia...*and Asia*...heard...Peter...and the same day there were added unto them *about three thousand souls”* (Acts 2:5,9,37,41).**

And the next day, *5,000 more souls* were added to the church. Then, all those thousands of Jews went back to their respective homelands with the gospel of the kingdom—*including* the Jews of Asia! And that happened *twelve years* before *Paul* tried to preach in Asia. By that time, Asia Minor was pretty well saturated with the kingdom gospel. So there was no hurry for Paul to preach *grace* in Asia, as you can imagine.

And the same is true for the area we read about in the next verse of our text:

**“After they were come to Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not” (Acts 16:7).**

But we know Bithyniawas *another* area where the kingdom gospel had already been preached, for Peter wrote a *letter* to those kingdom saints in Bithynia. He started it by saying,

**“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout...Asia *and Bithynia”* (I Peter 1:1).**

So there was certainly no hurry for Paul to preach grace in Bithynia either!

But now, if Asia and Bithynia were so saturated with the gospel of the kingdom, why did God bother having Paul preach there at all? I mean, souls are just as eternally saved under one program as they are under the other, right? So why send Paul to preach in Asia Bithynia?

We’re not told, but I believe it was because God wanted to show how He intended to flood the world with *grace,* just as He had *been* flooding it with the kingdom gospel, until the kingdom program stalled when those unsaved Jews stoned Stephen.

But as you read this passage, I have to tell you, if I were Paul and the Spirit kept telling me, “Don’t go here,” and “Don’t go there,” at some point I think I would throw up my hands and ask the Spirit, “Well, where *do* you want me to go?”

And in a minute, the Spirit is going to tell him. But He’s *pausing* here to get Paul to *think* about where he should go as an adult son. He’s trying to get Paul used to how things were changing from *the Spirit* telling him what to do, to *him* deciding what to do. Turns out even apostles need some time to adjust to dispensational changes. So the Spirit was stalling before telling Paul where to go, to give him time to adjust to the change, and learn to start examining his methods. He stalls him a little longer in the next verse of our text, where we read:

**“And they passing by Mysia came down to Troas” (Acts 16:7).**

Now as we’ll see in a moment, Paul didn’t stay in Troas long enough to preach there, but you don’t have to worry about their souls either. Later in Acts we read of Paul and his company:

**“we sailed...*to Troas*...where we abode *seven days”* (Acts 20:6).**

That’s probably when Mysia heard the gospel too. When a preacher puts up a tent and preaches for seven straight days, people are usually drawn to attend from neighboring towns as well. We know Paul preached night and day in Troas, for that’s the city in which a man who was listening to him preach on and on late one night fell asleep and fell out the third floor window. He died, and Paul had to raise him from the dead. Kind of like how I have to raise people from the dead after I deliver a boring message.

Well, it was in Troas that the Holy Spirit *finally* directed Paul in the direction He wanted him to go:

**“And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us” (Acts 16:9).**

Finally*,* the Spirit tells Paul where to go by giving him what that verse calls a vision in the night. In the past, God gave men messages in visions, and there’s another name for visions that came in the night. Job 33:15,16 says,

**“In *a dream,* in *a vision of the night,* when deep sleep falleth upon men, in slumberings upon the bed; Then He openeth the ears of men, *and sealeth their instruction.”***

Dreams and visions were some of the ways God communicated with the leaders of the nation Israel right from their very *beginning* as a nation, just as He told them He would do when He said:

**“If there be a prophet among you, I the LORD will make Myself known unto him *in a vision,* and will speak unto him *in a dream”* (Numbers 12:6).**

And here we see God speaking to the apostle Paul, telling *him* to go to Macedonia.

Now Macedonia is the area above Greece, right on the southeastern tip of Europe, where Europe meets the mideast, where the nation of Israel was located, of course. So what we’re seeing here is the roots of how Europe came to be such a Christian continent, as they were for many centuries to follow.

But here it is important to point out that the Spirit didn’t send Paul to Europe because God loved white Europeans more than He loved black Africans, or Chinamen, or Eskimos, or any other peoples of the world. God sent Paul to Macedonia simply because He knew that Europeans would *receive* the gospel faster than other people would, so grace would get out faster if it started in Europe.

And that’s not a *racist* thing to say, it’s a *generational* thing to say. You see, it was *at that time* that Europeans were more open to the gospel. Tons of them believed it and got saved, and then sent the gospel out to the rest of the world.

But eventually Europe got to where people were *not* as open to the gospel, and today the gospel isn’t very popular there at all. A friend once told me that when he and his wife were dining in a restaurant in Norway a few years ago, they bowed their heads to give thanks for their meal, as they always do, whether they are eating out or dining at home. He said that they got looks, and even comments, from other diners that were just short of *hostile.*

But before Europe got to be that way, they sent the gospel *to us here in the United States,* and to many other parts of the world as well. So God obviously knew what He was doing in sending the gospel to Europe first.

We can even see proof of that in the Scriptures themselves. Look what Paul wrote to a church he started in Greece:

**“...from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, *but also in every place* your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; *so that we need not to speak any thing”* (I Thessalonians 1:8).**

Paul says, as it were, “You guys preached the gospel *so well,* and it got out *so far,* I didn’t have to say a thing. I could have retired if I wanted to!” Of course he didn’t *want* to retire—but he could have! He was gradually learning the lesson that he’d reach more of the world if he didn’t try to reach it *alone.*

And the Thessalonians in Greece weren’t the *only* Europeans who were sounding out the word of the Lord. Paul told the Romans,

**“...your faith is spoken of *throughout the whole world”* (Romans 1:8).**

The Roman saints who lived in the European country of Italy had *also* been very open to receiving the gospel, and after they believed it *they* got it out *to the known world of the Roman Empire.*

You may be thinking, “How’d they manage to do that?” If so, have you ever heard the expression, “All roads lead to Rome”? That’s a figure of speech that’s based on what happened 2,000 years ago when, after the Romans conquered the known world, they built *roads* to all corners of their empire. Their purpose in building those roads was to *sustain* their empire. If they heard about a rebellion in some far corner of the empire, they wanted to be able to move troops swiftly to that far corner to *squash* it. President Eisenhower had our interstate highway system built for the same reason. As a former general in the military, he understood the importance of being able to defend our nation by being able to mobilize troops quickly.

Back in 2019, I was speaking at a Bible conference in northern England, and our host took us for a tour of his home town of Alcester. As we walked along, he pointed out some red lane markers that appeared right in the middle of a parking lot, and explained that those red lane markers marked the path of the Roman road that used to run right through their town. And that was way up there in northern England, a fur piece from Rome in Italy!

Some of those Roman roads are still standing! The Romans built *a quarter million miles* of roads that crisscrossed their nation. Here in the United States, we only have 160,000 miles of interstate highway by comparison. But merchants were allowed to use those roads as well as Roman soldiers, and *preachers* were allowed to use them too—and they did!

Of course, it helped get the gospel out when God let Paul get arrested, because the Romans put him in the VIP prison right below Caesar’s palace. Paul was so famous by that time that he wrote the Philippians and said,

**“...my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, *and in all other places”* (Philippians 1:13).**

Everybody in the palace heard that Paul had been locked up in their slammer, and all the royals wanted to go meet this famous prisoner and take a selfie with him. Okay, I made that last part up, but you get the idea!

And we know that *some* of the members of the royal family *got saved,* because Paul closed his letter to the Philippians by saying,

**“All the saints salute you, *chiefly they that are of Caesar’s household”* (Philippians 4:22).**

There were now “saints” *in the royal family.* And once news of *that* traveled down those Roman roads, it became acceptable to be a Christian throughout the world. You could even argue that it became *posh* to be a Christian, since people often try to emulate the royal family of a kingdom. And *that’s* how the faith of the Romans had become known throughout the world.

Now next, something *else* changed here in Acts 16. Look back in the first verse of our text in Acts 18:6:

**“Now when they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia” (Acts 16:6).**

Paul had just passed through *Galatia,* and it was there that something happened that he talked to them about in the epistle he wrote to them sometime later, when he said,

**“Ye know how *through infirmity of the flesh* I preached the gospel unto you *at the first.* And mytemptation *which was in my flesh* ye despised not...if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, *and have given them to me”***

Paul was “first” in Galatia *right here in our text* in Acts 16:6. And as you can see, at that time he had some kind of *infirmity* in his flesh that must have had something to do with his eyes, for after he led the Galatians to Christ, they loved him so much they would have given him *their* eyes to help with his infirmity.

Now health issues like that were not a problem for believers like Paul in the past. In Old Testament times, all a man had to do was go see a Jewish kingdom prophet like Elijah or Elisha, and he could heal you. And it just so happened that the apostle Paul *had* a Jewish kingdom prophet named Silas in his party, as we saw when we studied the last few verses of Acts 15. But the dispensation was a-changing, and Silas couldn’t heal Paul. So Paul did the same thing you’d do if that happened to you—he prayed! He later told the Corinthians,

**“...there was given to me *a thorn in the flesh....* For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, *that it might depart from me.* And He said unto me, *My grace is sufficient for thee:* for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (II Corinthians 12:7-9).**

When nobody could heal Paul, and he couldn’t heal himself, he prayed and asked *God* to heal him—and God said no! As He explained to the apostle, God’s strength is made perfect in our weakness in the dispensation of grace. In other words, when we’re physically weak, then we’re spiritually strong! And that’s the way it’s been for 2,000 years now. That’s a lot different than how things were for Israel under the law. In those days, God made sure they were physically strong if they were spiritually strong first. Quite a dispensational change, wouldn’t you say?

But now, that dispensational change called for another one. The story of that one begins in verse 10 of our text, where Luke wrote:

**“And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them” (Acts 16:10).**

As you read God’s Word, be sure to always pay attention to the little words, for they are often the most important words in a verse. Do you see that little word “we” there? That’s not the same pronoun we saw up in verses 6,7, where it said:

**“Now when *they* had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia,**

**“After *they* were come to Mysia, *they* assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not” (Acts 16:6,7).**

The “they” there consisted of Paul, Silas, and Timothy, the young man they picked up in the early verses of this chapter. But when verse 10 changes the “they” to *“we,”* that tells us that the apostle Luke, who wrote the Book of Acts, has now joined Paul’s party.

And that was *not* a coincidence. What did Luke do when he wasn’t busy apostle-ing? In case you forgot, look what Paul called him in Colossians 4:14:

**“Luke, *the beloved physician,* and Demas, greet you.”**

Luke was a medical doctor who had to become Paul’s personal physician *when God stopped healing His people.* We know that Luke wasn’t busy apostle-ing any more because God had *shut down* the kingdom program. So he dug up his stethoscope, dusted it off, and started following Paul around on his apostolic journeys. And Paul’s eye affliction wasn’t the only infirmity that required Dr. Luke’s tender ministrations. Read the description Paul gives us of the hardships he endured while serving the Lord in II Corinthians 11:22-34, and it won’t take you long to realize that Paul’s body probably hurt in places where he didn’t know he had places. And it was his need of a doctor that showed that a drastic dispensational change was being introduced since the time when the gift of healing could be found commonly among God’s people.

We actually see a *type* of yet *another* dispensational change in the way that God *showed* Paul this vision, commonly known as The Macedonian Call. You see, in the Old Testament, *God Himself* appeared in the visions He gave to His people to give them messages, or He made men see an *angel* in their instructional visions. But that’s not what happened here! Paul saw the vision of a *man* in *his* vision. That typifies how *today,* God’s messengers are *men,* not angels! Men like you, if you’re willing to be one.

If you think I’m reading too much into that, check it out for yourself. The next time you read the Bible through from cover to cover—which you do a little bit each day every year, right?—search and see, and you’ll never see God conveying a message to men by making a *man* appear in a vision—at least not until the dispensation of grace began with Paul’s conversion. But immediately after Paul got saved on Damascus Road, God told His servant Ananias,

**“...go...enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth, And hath seen in a vision *a man* named Ananias coming...” (Acts 9:11,12).**

God gave Paul a vision of a *man* coming to help him, because that’s how God helps us today in the dispensation of grace—by using *men,* not angels. So why not determine to be somebody’s angel this week?

There’s still *another* dispensational change pictured in this Macedonian vision. In the past, God appeared in visions *ordering* the Jews to do things. In *this* vision, Paul is being “prayed” or *begged* to come to Macedonia. That’s the difference between law and grace! Under the law, God *ordered* the Jews to do things *through Moses.* Under grace,He *begs* us to do things *through Paul.* Under the law, God never begged anyone to do anything! It was always, “Thou shalt,” and “Thou shalt not.” That’s *commanding,* not begging! But under grace, Paul begs us to do things *21 times.* He uses the Bible word “beseech” for begging, and 21 usages shows that *it was one of Paul’s favorite words.*

Let me give you an example of what I’m talking about. Let’s compare what Moses and Paul each said about walking in God’s ways. Moses told the Jews,

**“Ye shall *walk* in all the ways which the LORD your God hath *commanded* you” (Deuteronomy 5:33).**

As you can see, God *commanded* the Jews to walk in His ways. Compare that to how our apostle Paul tells us,

**“I...*beseech* you that ye *walk* worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called” (Ephesians 4:1).**

**“...we *beseech* you...that...ye...*walk* and...please God...more and more” (I Thessalo-nians 4:1).**

See the difference? Moses *commanded* the Jews to walk in God’s ways, but Paul *begs* us to walk in His ways. You don’t have to walk in God’s ways. But the more you find out all that God’s done for you in Christ, the more you’ll *want* to!

But now, don’t get me wrong. There are commandments in Paul’s epistles. But after giving them, Paul then *beseeches* the saints to *keep* those commandments. Moses never did that! He gave commandments, and then *threatened* the people of Israel of what would happen if they *didn’t* keep God’s commandments. Paul couldn’t do that, for God doesn’t punish us today if we break His commandments. So all Paul can do is *beg* us to keep them.

In closing, back in the 1950s a grace believer named Herbert Palmer published an article explaining the grace message in some well-known Christian magazine, and half a world away some Christians in the Philippines saw it and accepted the grace message. And do you know what they did after that? They wrote a letter to Mr. Palmer saying, “Come over into the Philippines and help us”—just like the man in Macedonia did in Paul’s dream. And Joe Watkins and Vernon Anderson answered the call.

That’s how God works in the dispensation of grace. But if you see a brother in need of your help, *don’t make him beg.* Be his angel today!