



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

Dr. Mark E. Gaskins
Senior Pastor

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When Vision Becomes Mission
Acts 16:6-15

A little over three years ago, we looked at this passage together one Sunday morning. At this juncture in our journey, I think it's appropriate that we revisit it this morning.

As a congregation we've been seeking *God's* vision and leading for what he wants to do among us and in us and through us. Over the past several years, that has taken us on a journey of discernment, a journey in which we have listened for how God was speaking to us through the Scriptures, through the body in conversations and in spiritual directions forums, through the burdens he has placed on the hearts of leaders in our church (both lay and clergy), and through the circumstances and opportunities he has placed before us. It's been amazing to see how God has been at work in all this.

But it hasn't been easy. Sometimes our personal preferences and prejudices and agendas distort our spiritual vision and perception, like grime on eyeglasses. I've worn glasses for years, and I'm so nearsighted you'd all be a blur without them. But it drives me crazy when I get something on the lenses! I have to clean them, so I can see clearly.

It's the same with our spiritual eyeglasses. We have to lay down whatever is distorting our vision so we can see things as God sees them, and walk forward into the future with him.

Paul's experience

Don't you wish it were as easy as it was for Paul here in Acts 16? Paul has this vision during the night—he sees a man from Macedonia standing in front of him, begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”¹

Immediately it's clear to Paul and his companions that God is calling them to preach the gospel to the people in Macedonia.

Now Paul has this vision while they're in Troas, on the shore of the Aegean Sea on the northwest corner of Asia Minor, or what we know today as Turkey. The Aegean Sea lies between Asia Minor and Greece. Macedonia was the northern region of Greece.

Once he sees the vision, Paul and his associates Silas, Timothy, and now apparently Luke (notice how he includes himself at this point, switching from “they” to “we”) get ready at once to leave for Macedonia. They put out to sea from Troas, sail to the island of Samothrace (about halfway to Macedonia), then the next day to Neapolis on the Greek shore. From there, it wasn't far on foot to Philippi, the leading city of that district of Macedonia. Philippi was also a Roman colony.

¹ Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

Easy, wasn't it? We sometimes fancy that if we just knew what God wants us to do, we'd do it right away, don't we? Just like Paul did . . .

The fact is that it wasn't really quite that easy for Paul.

The circumstances of this second of Paul's missionary journeys were actually set up by a painful experience. Early on, when nobody else trusted Paul or wanted to have much to do with him, Barnabas took him under his wing. Paul had been known as Saul of Tarsus, a devout Pharisee who was bitterly opposed to the Way of Jesus, as the early Christians liked to refer to it. The risen Lord Jesus had confronted Saul as he was on his way to Damascus to persecute any Christians he found there, and laid claim to him for his own purposes.

But the Christians were understandably skeptical. It could have just been a trick to infiltrate and find them out so he and others could persecute them even more. We can understand their skepticism, can't we?

Yet in spite of this skepticism, Barnabas was true to his nickname. His given name was Joseph. But he was such a compassionate and encouraging soul that the apostles had given him this name Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement" (Acts 4:36).

So Barnabas befriended Saul, and when the work in Antioch was growing and Barnabas needed help teaching the people, he went to Tarsus and brought Saul back to help him. From there, the two of them were sent out by the Holy Spirit and the church at Antioch on what we usually call Paul's first missionary journey.

After they returned and went to Jerusalem for the council that determined that it was *not* necessary for Gentiles to convert to Judaism before they could become Christians, Paul and Barnabas started talking about going back and checking on all the churches they started on that first journey.

But there was a problem. On that first journey, a young man named John Mark had accompanied them. But part of the way through their journey, he had deserted Paul and Barnabas. Now the Son of Encouragement wanted to give him another chance and take him with them again. But Paul would have none of that. Luke tells us in 15:39 that

They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.
Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left,
commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.

It was a very painful experience for both Paul and Barnabas.

That wasn't the only difficulty, though. After Paul and Silas had started on their journey revisiting the churches Paul and Barnabas had established, they came to the town of Lystra, where they met the young believer Timothy. Paul saw a lot of promise in him, and wanted to take him with them. Timothy joined Paul and Silas, and they traveled throughout Phrygia and Galatia in the central part of Asia Minor. Paul's plan had been to move west into the province of Asia (the western part of Asia Minor), but Luke says that they were "kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia" (16:6). They traveled across the northern part of Asia Minor to the area known as Mysia. Paul wanted to turn east and go into Bithynia to preach, but again Luke says, "the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to."

Paul had a plan and a strategy. And by all accounts, it was a good one. But he was meeting with difficulty at every turn. God was preventing him from carrying out his plans. It was as though the Lord Jesus was saying to him, "Paul, you have a good plan; but it's not *my* plan."

And so finally they came to Troas.

You know, when you think about it, maybe Paul's experience of trying to discern God's will in his mission endeavors wasn't as different from *our* experience as we usually think it was. Paul had conflict with people he was close to, conflict that became so sharp that they agreed to part company. Paul laid out a plan, and no doubt did it prayerfully. It looked like a wise strategy. It made sense. Yet the Lord Jesus wouldn't let him do it. I know I've experienced that; haven't you? I've seen times when opportunities presented themselves that made all the sense in the world, and I thought almost certainly that this was what God was going to do in my life. And then, sometimes in ways that were hard to explain or understand, the door closed, shut tight. The Lord said, "No."

Sometimes it happens that way with us as a church. We prayerfully determine what we believe is the way God wants us to go, and then he shuts the door. There's often a real mystery to the way God works. And sometimes it can even be confusing—at least for the moment.

But then Paul has this vision! And it all becomes clear. *Macedonia* is where they're to go—*Macedonia*—not the province of Asia, not Bithynia, but *Macedonia*. Paul has his sights set on Asia Minor, Turkey. God has his sights set on Europe!

So they went to Macedonia as quickly as they could. And while the vision was of *a man* begging them to come help, it was *a group of women* that they first encountered. Apparently there were not enough devout Jewish men in Philippi to establish a Jewish synagogue. But there were apparently some devout Jewish women, or at least some God-fearing Gentile women who were attracted to, but hadn't converted to the Jewish faith.

Paul's usual strategy was to preach and teach in the Jewish synagogue in a city. Since there was apparently no synagogue in Philippi, Paul and his companions went down to the river on the Sabbath, expecting to find a place of prayer. They did. It was primarily, if not totally, women who had gathered there. They began to talk with these women, and Paul shared the gospel. One of the women, Lydia, was a dealer in purple cloth. She was from Thyatira *in the province of Asia*. The Lord opened her heart and she became a believer. She and the members of her household were baptized, and she persuaded Paul and his companions to stay at her house. And that was the beginning of the church in Philippi!

Imagine that! The Spirit kept them from preaching in Asia. But now here in Macedonia, one of the first converts is a prominent woman *from the province of Asia*, and her home first hosts the church in Philippi! And who knows; she or someone in her household may well have carried the gospel back to Thyatira! It's amazing how God works, isn't it?

But what if Paul had tried to force it, and had gone into Asia when God was saying no? What if he had ignored his vision of the man from Macedonia? What if he had *not* been open to the guidance and vision God was giving?

That's how God works, you know. Sometimes he quietly guides us, even when we don't realize it. Then sometimes he gives us clear indications about how he wants to work through us. Here in this text, he had done both.

And Paul and his companions had responded faithfully. *They lived out the vision God gave them in their mission.* That's what *has* to happen. Vision by itself is *not* enough. It has to translate into mission. *God gives the vision; we must live it out as we join Jesus on his mission in the world!*

Living out the vision

Back in 2006, we as a congregation went through a spiritual directions process. Through that experience we sought to discern the vision God was giving us as a church, and to clarify the mission he was entrusting to us. Out of that process we adopted a vision statement and a new mission statement.

The vision is simple: *Embodying the presence of Christ to Sanford and the world.* That's our guiding star. That's what we believe God is calling us to do. That's our reason for existence.

But our vision has to become our mission. The mission statement we adopted out of that time of discernment says:

By the grace of God and the power of His Holy Spirit, we will embody the presence of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ to Sanford and the world through our worship, our witness, and our way of life as His disciples.

As the church, we are the body of Christ. He is present among us corporately, and in us as his people individually. We represent him to the world. We are to be his instruments so that he continues his mission to the world *through us*. We are to embody his presence to our surrounding community and to all the world.

Through our worship, our witness, and our way of life as followers of Jesus, our vision becomes our mission. Through worshiping God, bearing witness to the world through our works and our words, and becoming like Jesus in our character, our attitudes, and our actions, we embody his presence and join him on his mission.

Sometimes we do that in intentional ways, sometimes as part of our everyday life with Christ. Sometimes we do it well, sometimes we don't. But now the time has come for us to take things to the next level.

Earlier this year, looking at the needs right around us, we as a church made a commitment to develop a ministry to low-income families and individuals in *the community immediately surrounding our facilities* (including immigrant families) that will open the door to share the gospel of Christ with them in word as well as in deed. We envisioned this to include addressing literacy, economic, legal, and basic health needs, seeking partnerships with other helping agencies and congregations to accomplish this task. And now the time has come for us to begin this new mission to Jonesboro.

Last Sunday night, 38 members of our church met to consider how we need to move forward. This group included representatives from our Outreach and Missions committees, our Deacons, and other interested members of our congregation. After an extended time of prayer for God's guidance and direction, Sam Carter presented to us some of the literacy needs of our community and some opportunities to partner with other agencies and organizations to help meet those needs. Our members are going to hear a specific recommendation from this group in the business meeting that will follow today's service. While many of these potential partners are not specifically Christian organizations, I hope you'll see the opportunity to cooperate with them to build relationships in the community. As we build those relationships, our presence embodies Christ's presence and care, and thus bears a witness. And the relationships that we build by getting involved in our community right around us will over time open the door for us to share a verbal witness that will be much more readily heard than if we simply went out knocking on doors and handing out information.

So what will it look like for the vision of the Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church to become mission? Many of us think it will look like becoming more involved with our schools and opening our facilities for ESL and adult education classes. It will look like encountering people in the community in the meeting of their needs, building relationships with them, witnessing Christ's love to them through our presence, so that we can ultimately minister to their deepest need of a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Can you see it? Will we do it?

It's time for our vision to become mission!

†*MEG*