The Westbury Baptist Sunday Message

When We Can't Understand God's Directions

September 6
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Mark read from Acts 16:4–15 which records Paul, Silas and Timothy continuing their missionary journey. At first, their work appeared to be progressing exactly as hoped: churches were being strengthened in faith and growing daily. Then, despite their good intentions, the Holy Spirit prevented them from preaching in several regions. Four doors seemed to close one after another. Scripture does not explain exactly how this happened, but Paul and his companions recognised that the Holy Spirit was guiding and protecting them. Their experience reminds us that a closed door is not necessarily failure. Often, God is redirecting us because He can see a greater plan that we cannot yet understand.

This truth can apply to our own lives and to the life of the church. Plans may be prayerfully made and appear promising, yet suddenly come to a halt, as happened with the proposed subdivision and building of units. God's 'not now' does not necessarily mean 'never'. We may understand His reason later, or perhaps not in this lifetime, but we can trust that He has not lost control. When the Holy Spirit blocks a path, we should not force our way around the obstacle; instead, we should remain prayerful and open to His direction.

Paul and his companions also teach us not to surrender to discouragement. After repeated setbacks and a journey of more than a thousand kilometres, they did not abandon their calling. Discouragement can tempt us to believe that everything is too difficult and that we should give up. It can be hard to know whether God wants us to persevere or change direction, so we must continue seeking Him and listening carefully to the Holy Spirit.

Gideon's story in Judges 6 shows that even faithful people can struggle to understand God's guidance. Feeling weak and inadequate, Gideon asked for signs involving a fleece before accepting that God had called him to rescue Israel. God patiently reassured him. This encourages us that God understands our uncertainty, hears our pleas for help and can make His leading clear as we prayerfully seek Him. He also often chooses people who seem unlikely or unqualified to accomplish His purposes.

Eventually Paul received a vision of a man pleading, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' After discussing it together, the group concluded that God was calling them there and obeyed. In Philippi, Lydia heard the gospel, opened her heart and was baptised with her household. Her home became a meeting place for the first church on European soil. What had seemed like a failed journey was actually God's way of opening a much wider door for the gospel to enter Europe.

The central lesson is to remain prayerful and in step with the Holy Spirit. When we cannot understand God's direction, it is because we cannot see the whole plan—but He can. Like Paul and his companions, we are called to trust, obey and keep moving when God redirects us. Through Jesus we are God's sons and daughters, and His Spirit lives within us to guide us into His purposes.