

Moving Forward When Plans Have To Be Changed
Acts 16:6-10

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When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. Acts 16:7-8

We are in a season of forcibly changed plans. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced vacation trips to be cancelled, weddings to be postponed, wedding ceremonies to be reconfigured, medical appointments to be rescheduled, elective surgeries to be put on hold, and even visits with family to be thought through twice before happening if at all.

It is proving to be frustratingly difficult to navigate our way through 2020. The difficulties arise not because we are indecisive or because we are poor at planning. The difficulties arise because circumstances normally out of our control are increasingly out of our control this year.

When you sit down with yourself and wonder how to cope when something keeps changing your carefully made plans these are some biblical strategies to keep in mind. I call them biblical strategies because they are ones I see the Apostle Paul put into play in Act 16.

I had Acts 16:6-10 read for us today in the worship service but in preaching I want to use a wide-angle lens and draw upon some of the material that precedes the section that was read for us. Let's start by laying out that whole narrative and then go back over it to lay out the strategies that emerge from it. Again, my overall theme is "Moving Forward When Plans Have To Be Changed."

An overview

Here, then, is an overview of the Bible story at hand. The Apostle Paul's initial plan is to travel on a missionary journey (his second) with his fellow-worker Barnabas. The main work is to encourage the Christians in church after church along their way, beginning at Antioch, the city where they are when the story begins (Acts 15:35-36). Paul's plan is disappointed almost immediately because he and Barnabas have a falling out over Mark (15:36-39). Paul still leaves Antioch on his missionary journey but he takes Silas with him rather than Barnabas (15:40-41). They move north and then turn west, heading toward the Province of Asia, but something happens to prevent them from entering Asia (16:1-6). They make plans to go into the region of Bithynia, but something stands in the way to disappoint that plan, too (16:7). They end up in Troas instead (16:8), where they hear a call to move into Macedonia, and that is what they do (16:9-12).

That is the narrative sweep of the story before us this morning. It is a story full of rapidly changing plans. The plans change not because of Paul's decisions but because of circumstances

out of his control. Let's retrace this narrative to identify some strategies to put into place when our plans have to be changed quickly. I discern five strategies that emerge from this material.

First, when your plans have to change accept the fact they have to change.

John Colville was miserable because Gay Margesson would not marry him. John Colville was one of Winston Churchill's aides when Winston Churchill was first Prime Minister of England. John Colville was in love with Gay Margesson. He asked her to marry him at least twice. She turned him down every time. She was happy to maintain their relationship on a friendship basis. He tried. But after one of the times they were together simply as friends he wrote her a long letter saying he could not continue. He had to stop seeing her. He wrote the letter, but he never sent it. He went on being miserable for years. John Colville denied himself opportunities for happiness for a number of years because he could not accept Gay Margesson's denials.¹

The Apostle Paul wanted Bithynia. But he was denied Bithynia. When he was denied Bithynia he accepted the fact he could not enter Bithynia. He did not keep dwelling on Bithynia. He did not double-down on Bithynia. There was no Bithynia 2.0 or 3.0. He accepted the fact that Bithynia was not going to be his field of labor.

If you are going to move on when your plans have to change, you have to accept the fact that they have to change.

Second, when your plans have to change don't let disappointment become defeat in your soul.

When Paul was denied entry into Asia and then again into Bithynia he did not give up and head back to Antioch where his journey started. When he found he was not going to be able to travel with Barnabas he did not throw up his hands and stay home. He was disappointed, to be sure, but he did not let his disappointment defeat him. Eventually – though I don't quite know when – he made this his motto: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). The same motto may have been in his mind when he said, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed . . ." (2 Cor. 4:8-9) Paul was disappointed repeatedly, but he did not let disappointment lodge as defeat inside his soul.

For contemporary illustrations of this, Google the names of four politicians, all of whom were or are in wheelchairs, some part of the time, others all the time. The four are Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Max Cleland, Greg Abbott, and Tammy Duckworth. Polio put FDR in a wheelchair. Enemy explosions put Max Cleland and Tammy Duckworth in wheelchairs when they served in the U.S. military overseas. As for Greg Abbott, he landed in a wheelchair in his twenties when he was out jogging one day and a tree fell on him. All four of these people were deeply disappointed, to say the least, but none of them let disappointment become defeat in their souls.

If you are going to move on when your plans have to change, let yourself be disappointed but don't let disappointment become a spirit of defeat inside your soul.

¹ Erik Larson, *The Splendid and the Vile* (New York: Crown, 2020), 53-54, 363-364.

Third, when your plans have to change be careful about attributing every change to God.

There is a very popular theology afoot in the land. Maybe you've heard it. Maybe you've said it. It goes like this: "Everything happens for a reason." I'd be very careful with a line like that if I were you. Running with that as your philosophy in life is like running with the long blade of a sharp knife. It can cut you up pretty badly. I don't know that everything happens for a reason. Some things just happen.

Look around for God when your plans change. Look for the hand of God by all means, but be careful. Some things just happen to change our plans, and God has nothing to do with them.

It took me a while to see this in the text, but it is plain. Paul attributed some of the changes in his plans to God, but not all of them. The blocked entry into Asia was attributed to the Holy Spirit (16:6). The subsequent denial of Bithynia was attributed to the Spirit of Jesus (16:7). But neither Mark's behavior nor the separation from Barnabas over Mark's behavior are said to be divinely caused. They just happened.

If you are going to move on when your plans are changed be careful about attributing every change to the plan of God.

Fourth, when your plans have to be changed be open to the new opportunities that come your way.

Every time Paul's plans changed in our story for today there was not just something to let go. There was something to embrace. After he let go of Barnabas there was Silas (15:40). After Mark left there was Timothy, whom Paul came to regard as his child in the faith (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2). [As an aside I feel compelled to remind you that there was, eventually, a reconciliation between Paul and Mark, and it led to one of the greatest of Bible passages: 2 Tim. 4:11b: "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry." But back to my main point!] After Bithynia there was Troas, which led to Macedonia, which meant the gospel traveled into Europe for the first time (16:9-12). When Paul's plans changed there was something to let go and something to embrace.

For a contemporary example of this, think of the WKOW-TV meteorologist Bob Lindmeier. His first plan in life was not to be a television weatherman. He grew up in St. Cloud, MN, and wanted to be an aeronautical engineer. His math skills disappointed that plan. He took a class in meteorology in college and developed an interest in it. He wanted to be a behind the scenes forecaster for the National Weather Service or the U.S. Air Force. The lack of jobs in those fields disappointed that plan. He took a job with a television station in Wausau, WI, but failed miserably because he was so nervous on air. He was fired after six months. He moved into radio work here in the Madison area, and that helped him to develop the ease and style he now has.² There were disappointments throughout his early career. When his plans were changed

² Howard Hardee, "Bob Lindmeier, WKOW-TV's long-time meteorologist, talks straight on climate change," *Wisconsin State Journal*, December 29, 2019. https://madison.com/weather/bob-lindmeier-wkow-tvs-longtime-chief-meteorologist-talks-straight-on-climate-change/article_aa5d9482-d2a1-5785-a1de-036d3ebe6611.html. Accessed June 22, 2020.

because of circumstances beyond his control, there was something to let go and something new to embrace.

If you are going to move on when your plans are changed you have to take advantage of the new opportunities that come your way.

Fifth, when your plans have to change remain true to your core purpose in life.

When Paul set out from Antioch in the first place, he set out on a missionary journey of encouragement. His purpose was to check on the churches to see how they were doing and to strengthen them as he could (15:36). That is what he wanted to do with Barnabas. He could not do it with Barnabas. That plan was disappointed. But that is what he came to do with Silas. The journey, though not with Barnabas as planned, was still a missionary journey of encouragement. He strengthened churches in Syria and Cilicia (15:41), Derbe and Lystra (16:5), through Phrygia and Galatia, and ultimately in Greece and Rome. Before he reached Rome, he said his desire was to strengthen the Romans or, as he said, “be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.” (Rom 1:12) Paul’s plans changed constantly, often against his will, but he kept to the same purpose through all the changes.

If you are going to move on when your plans are changed, move on, but stay true to who you are meant to be under God.

We are in a season of forcibly changed plans. It does not appear that will change anytime soon. We cannot choreograph events to our liking in every circumstance. Change is a virus in the air and it is one we cannot avoid contracting.

You cannot stop change. You cannot stop unwanted change. But you can cope with it. Accept that your plans have to change when they have to be changed. Don’t let disappointment become a spirit of defeat inside your soul. Be careful about attributing every change to God. Be open to new opportunities as they arise. And always stay true to your core values and purpose.