

When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.
Acts 16.7.

Why do we agree on the big things, but squabble over the trivial? We looked at Acts 15 last time where the apostles had to settle the huge problem of the Gentiles. Were they part of God's people? Did they have to become Jews first, before they could know Christ? It nearly split the church, and yet everyone under the Holy Spirit came to an amicable agreement.

But just go on to the next verses, and we see Paul and his faithful companion, Barnabas, falling out over nothing, Acts 15.37-38... And v39 tells us that it was a very *violent* disagreement... I rather like this little episode in Acts. It shews the apostles as real human beings, and not as plaster saints. The problems and rows we have in our own modern churches are not so very different from those 2,000 years ago. As I have said many times before, the Bible is 100% true-to-life. It has real people in it. John, called Mark, had obviously let Paul down, v38... But Barnabas, the 'son of encouragement', wanted to give him another chance. We also know from Col 4.10 that John Mark was Barnabas' *cousin*.

So in chap 16 we read how Paul and Silas set off on their *second* missionary journey. And in the town called Lystra Paul meets one of the most attractive people of the NT, Timothy. It means in Greek 'God-honourer'. We know from other parts of the NT that Paul came to love Timothy, calling him 'my dear son'. Again, we come across real people, not plaster saints. Timothy was a real worrier, a shy little Christian. Let's call him 'timid Timmy!' He wasn't good at standing up to people or

telling others about Jesus. Perhaps you can identify with him.

So Paul and Silas and their new companion Timothy press on, preaching Jesus as Saviour and Lord in what we know now as Turkey. They head north, but then something strange happens, 16.7... Try as hard as they can something keeps stopping them from crossing the border into the province of Bithynia in the north. What was going on? Surely God wanted them to go north to preach there? It all became clear when they settled down for the night in Troas. Paul had this strange dream of a man begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us', vv8-9...

This Bible episode has always intrigued me. Here is Paul pushing into the north to take the Gospel up-country, but every effort he makes is thwarted. Have you ever had a bluebottle on the inside of your window. You don't want to squash it, so you open a window. The stupid fly buzzes furiously in a futile attempt to get through the glass, and every time you gently move him towards the open window, what does he do? He refuses your offer of escape and returns to the original spot where he hasn't a hope. That was Paul, trying to get over the Mysian border into Bithynia. All his efforts failed. It was only when he had the vision of the Macedonian man, that he realised that God *didn't* want him in the north, but in Macedonia. And what was so important about Macedonia? It was *Europe*. Remember the key-text of Acts? 1.8:

And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

To get to the ends of the earth, the Gospel had to pass to *Europe*. We are the beneficiaries of the plea of the man of Macedonia to Paul. Thank God for him! V10...

Very interesting, I'm sure, but what has that to say to you in your life? Have you ever desperately wanted something, but the door has been slammed firmly shut in your face? What you wanted seemed so right, so sensible, and yet it wasn't to be. It's a bitter pill to swallow, isn't it?

Recently in my daily Bible Study notes I read about a married Australian missionary couple, John and Elaine Olley. After training, their hearts were set on missionary work in Assam in India. They were sure this was God's will. How could it not be? And yet they found themselves among the first group of Australians to be refused visas. What on earth was God up to? But after twelve months' uncertainty another door opened in Hong Kong. Soon afterwards all Christian missionaries were expelled from Assam. God wanted the Olleys in Hong Kong, not in India, just as God wanted Paul now in Europe not Asia.

As one door closes and another opens, sometimes, like the Olleys, we see the reason soon afterwards. Paul did, v10...

But there are times when you may never this side of eternity see the reason why a door has been shut in your face. I don't want to bang on about this all the time, but it is clear to Laura and me that God does not want us to have a family. That door has been cruelly slammed in our faces, and, to be honest, it's hard to accept. Are we such bad people? Would we have made such terrible parents? It makes no sense. And we don't have the relief of seeing another door opening.

So how do you respond? Do you say, 'Life's a bitch and then you die'? Or, 'There's a loving God with a plan?'

It's the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth this

year, and his great theme was the sovereignty of God. As Laura and I look at what has happened to us, - the pain, and the emptiness of the future, - we struggle with the sovereignty of God. Is this God's sovereign plan for us? But what *is* faith? Faith is trust. It is trusting that God *is* our heavenly Father; trusting that he cares about us, trusting that he will open another door. 'Great is thy faithfulness', we sing in that hymn from *Lamentations* 3.23: 'your mercies are new every morning; great is your faithfulness'. At the moment we don't feel his mercies new every morning, but we must hang on to his faithfulness. He won't let any of us go. After the terror of Good Friday, God did raise Jesus from the dead. We all walk by faith, not by sight, and trust God's promise in *Nahum* 1.7: 'the Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him'.

God is a God of surprises. I heard recently a beautiful true story of an elderly woman attending the funeral of her husband. Each of them came from a small family, and they had no children. Apart from the retired clergyman, a local canon from around here, she was the only person at that funeral. What a sad scene! Her life was over. What had she ahead of her now? But do you know what happened? That retired clergyman, a widower, with a huge family fell for that widow, and now they are married. That woman now has a future. Beautiful, isn't it? *and true!* But that's how God works. Getting into *God's* will is the most difficult thing for us. But his mercies are new every morning; great is his faithfulness. The sun still shines even when there are clouds. Put your trust in God.