

## On a Mission

Acts 16:6-10

October 30, 2016

Giotis Kantartzis

[Randy Lovelace]

It's a distinct pleasure this morning to introduce to you this morning's preacher, Pastor Giotis Kantartzis. Pastor Giotis, please come forward. As you do I want to introduce him. He is the—I was going to say the senior minister, but he's actually the only minister of one of the largest churches, evangelical churches, in Athens, the First Greek Evangelical Church in central Athens. I had the distinct honor of being able to preach in this pulpit when Anthony Swon, Robbie Pennington, and I were traveling in Athens to meet with different church planters that are part of the network and movement of churches that Pastor Giotis has been leading. And it is our joy to welcome you here. I first knew of Pastor Giotis when I was a church planter in New Jersey. We were all part of worldwide speaking work of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. We had never had the opportunity to meet. And then three years ago now, I believe, it was at the MTW World Mission Conference where I heard you preach for the first time. And then last year as we were beginning the series on Acts—crazy—Pastor Giotis shows up and he was in my office; I took a selfie with him. And I'm, like, this is crazy. We're starting in the book of Acts in the section about Athens, and here he is. And so it is God's wonderful story of being able to weave what God is doing in your life and our story, and I'm very grateful for that.

Pastor Giotis's English is excellent. However, after reading the text this morning, I now realize why he asked me to read it in English. It's a little bit different trick when you're doing this. So I'm going to read this morning's passage, and then turn it right over to you. Ok? So Acts 16:6-10. Hear now God's word.

<sup>6</sup> And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. <sup>7</sup> And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. <sup>8</sup> So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. <sup>9</sup> And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." <sup>10</sup> And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Pastor Giotis, preach the gospel to us.

[Pastor Giotis Kantartzis]

Of course this is a scary passage with all these names, you realize. For one more reason for the Presbyterian, because it contains the night vision, you know, from the Holy Spirit, but we'll deal with that. There is another reason why this passage, you know, is an interesting passage. But before I do that, before I go on to the text, let me say how thrilled I am and how blessed I am. An honor to be here with you. Actually this is the first time that I get to preach in a church where the senior pastor has preached first in my church. So this is you, Randy. And also it's a blessing for me to be here with my son George, who is finishing the Bible college and entering into ministry. But also I would like to acknowledge three families that are one way or another

related to us in Athens, who live in the area now, and they came to worship with us. Elina and Leonidas, Basil and Maria, and Joan and Sarah who are over there. So it's a blessing and I really appreciate you coming, guys.

So this is a passage that in one sense is not a really significant passage. Because we don't have, let's say, a sermon that Paul preaches. We don't have, like, a persecution that Paul had to flee from. We don't have something spectacular. It's one of these transitional passages, as we call them in the exegesis. But many times—and that is perhaps the first lesson that we may learn here—is that many times in those insignificant moments, in these moments that sometimes we just pass through without really observing, see them without seeing them—as Randy said before—in those insignificant moments sometimes God is working or doing spectacular things, like in this case. Because in these passages actually what happens, and what [??] in this passage is the reason why we are here right now worshiping the Lord. It is the time that the Gospel leaves the confines of the Jewish worlds and moves into the West. It is the passage where Paul receives the call to go to Macedonia, to enter European soil, so to say. So in some ways this is a very significant passage when we think about missions. We see how Paul eventually moved out of something to enter into a new territory. So that will be the topic. We will try to see what does it mean to be on a mission. And being a good Presbyterian I'll have three points.

First one. The first thing that I would like us to notice is that in order to be on a mission we need to follow God as he leads us out of our comfort zone. In order to be on a mission we need to be ready to follow God as God is pushing us out of our comfort zone. See with me verses 6 and 7. What we see there in both verses is that Paul is trying to do something, and God is saying no to him. I don't know if you've noticed that. O, verse 6. I'm not going to say the names. He was going through all these nice places, but he was hindered by the Holy Spirit. He wanted to go to someplace and he was blocked, hindered, by the Holy Spirit. And the same thing in verse 7. He came through this other nice place in order to go to the other place, and the Spirit of Jesus didn't allow that. So twice we read in these two verses that Paul tried to do something and God blocked him, forbade him.

Now there is this interesting thing that you need to know Greek in order to appreciate. The verb that we have in verse 6, where he says that Paul was 'hindered' by the Holy Spirit. That verb 'hindered' is a verb called *kóluó*. You're not supposed to know that, but it's a very interesting word. Because when you go to the very end of the book of Acts, the very end of the book of Acts, and, you know, if you would, like, come with me, in Chapter 28 of the book of Acts (it's a long book), we find the word. I don't know if you know what is the last word of the book of Acts. I don't know if Randy, when you went through the book of Acts, you know, you pointed that out. What is the very last word of the book of Acts? It's an adverb, actually. And it is the exact same word that is being used in verse 6 that we read. And it is 'without a hindrance.' The verse says that Paul was able to preach the gospel of the kingdom 'without a hindrance.' The very last word of the book of Acts. It is as if the whole book of Acts can be summarized as such: Nothing can stop Paul from preaching the gospel."

I mean, imagine the situation. Paul is in a Roman prison, and he preaches the gospel of God without a hindrance. Paul has a Roman guard? No problem. Paul can preach the gospel of God without a hindrance. Right before he was in a shipwreck. Nothing can stop Paul. I mean, that can be a way to summarize the book of Acts. Nothing can hinder, nothing can stop, Paul from

preaching the gospel. The only exception is verse 6. The only time that Paul has been hindered to do something is here. And the interesting thing is that the one who hinders Paul is not the Roman guard, it's not the religious authorities. It is God. Have you ever thought of that? Interesting, isn't it. I mean, the only time that Paul wants to do something and he cannot because something or someone blocked the way is not—I'm saying again—the Romans. They tried; he is able to go through. He is in a Roman prison with a Roman guard and he still preaches. Nothing could stop him. The only time that Paul cannot do what he wants to do is here, and the one person who hinders Paul is God, and the question is why.

The answer is this. Because God loves Paul, and he has plans for him, and he wants to protect Paul from himself. Why am I saying that? Many times I say to my congregation that the best exegetical skill in order to understand the Bible is to know how to count. One, two, three, four, and to know that five comes after four in these kinds of things. Sometimes you don't need much to really understand the Scriptures. So if we—we are in verse 6, right? If we read verses 4 and 5. . . Come back with me to Chapter 16, verses 4 and 5. [??] Again, math. Chapter 16 comes right after Chapter 15. And in Chapter 15 we have this council scene. Now remember that there are all these new believers coming from the Gentiles and the question is what do we do with them? Do they have to become Jews first and get circumcised? And there is this council and they end up with this decision. And it's interesting that Paul, for the first time—Paul was always marginalized—and for the first time he goes mainstream. People respect him and give him authority. And Paul, now, with this new authority, he goes around, and as we read in verse 4 and 5, he preaches in all these towns in Asia. And we read in verse 5 that the churches were edified in their faith and there was growth.

And let me tell you, if you are successful, you know, why should you want to leave? Hmm? It is the first time for Paul that eventually people take him seriously, and there is success, there is fruit. The churches love him. Everywhere he goes there is growth. And, you know, there is always the temptation to say: *Let's stay here and enjoy the blessings*. But God loves Paul, and he says, 'No, Paul. You're not going to stay here. Why? Because you need to be on a mission, and in order to be on a mission you need to leave your comfort zone.' Paul was very well where he was, very successful, everything made sense. That was an environment that he knew; it was controllable. But God, in order to set you on a mission, he says, enough with that. You need to move on.

Let me tell you a little bit about our story. We are a Presbyterian church. It seems as if someone picked up a Presbyterian church from the south of the United States and dropped it in the middle of Athens. I was saying the other day about this old lady who came from Alabama, visiting us, and after the morning service she came up to me and said, "Pastor, that was amazing! I was so blessed. I really felt at home." And I said, "That's terrible." She said, "What?" I said, "Here it is you come all the way from Alabama to downtown Athens and you feel at home. You know, there must be something. . ." But this is how, you know, who we are. We have a pipe organ. I wear the collar. We're that type of Presbyterian. Good Presbyterians. [??] So the church has been there, like, for the last 160 years. And being a minority, as we are in Greece, a very small, tiny minority—zero point an insignificant number, I don't even know it, percent of the population are evangelical believers. So this is our situation. Being a minority, it is very easy to feel comfortable and protected behind the four walls of the church. And to say, OK, here is an environment that is my comfort zone. I know what to do. I'm happy here. Outside is the

world. Let's stay here. And many times you can be fruitful. You can be happy doing all these things. But God in his mercy says at times, as he said in the case of Paul: Enough. No. He blocks the way. He's not allowing us to live more in that comfort zone.

And in our situation this is what happened. We started feeling the burden to do something in our town. Our church is really, as I said, in the heart of the city. I was saying earlier to all of the Sunday school class, that if there is ever a competition about the best view out of a pastor's office window, I would win. I see the Parthenon; I see the Temple of Zeus, Hadrian's Arch, and all these nice places. The church is really in a very central location of the town. But for many, many years we were ignoring that. You know, the situation is that when our forefathers moved to that location it was actually their decision to move outside the city, because back then, 160 years ago, there was a lot of persecution, misunderstanding, difficulties. So the idea is, let's get out of the city. Let's be in an isolated place. Let's not bother them so that they don't bother us. Right? And that can become your mission statement. It became certainly our mission statement: Don't bother them so that they don't bother us. So we live our little happy life within the four walls.

But then the Lord started working in us, showing us the city, showing us the outside, showing us. . . But you know, us Presbyterians, it takes forever to discuss and analyze things. So we're talking about that to the board of the elders. OK, perhaps we need to plant a church. And actually we're thinking about planting a church in an area called Exarchia. Exarchia is the anarchy capital of Greece, of Europe, perhaps of the world. Many anarchists live there. And I don't know if you remember during 2008 when all the riots ensued. They were on the news; people demonstrating, looting, burning—a crazy situation in Athens. And so we felt compelled to go and plant the church, the first church plant, to go and plant the church there, in Exarchia. And of course, I mean, that was a scary thing. And we're thinking about that, praying about that discussing over that, committees. You know how it is—on and on it goes. And in 2008 something happened. It was the year that we had the terrible riot in Greece. A policeman shot and killed a fifteen-year-old teenager in Exarchia and then there was violence. The violence erupted and the whole city was in a big mess and we're really in the midst of it all. And I remember I was in my car driving and somebody called me and says, you know, we are in the news, because they were following what was going on. And there were all the anarchists in front of our church and the police were on the other side and they were fighting.

And so I drive and I run to the church—it was not a wise thing to do—but they had just left. And I entered the sanctuary. Just keep in mind that our church is like that, but we have windows on this side and the other side, you know, and this is the street, the road, and windows. I entered in and all the windows of the church were broken. And there was smoke from the tear gas. At first I felt like I was Isaiah in the temple with all this smoke and stuff, but the stones and marbles and, you know, it was...it was a mess. And it's funny, that time one of the elders calls me up, the treasurer, he says what happened? And I said they broke all the windows. And just, oh, and he started relating the cost. But I felt that was a God-moment in my life. I felt that for many, many, many years we thought that we can be safe and we can safely ignore what is on the other side. We can talk about that—you know, have committees, analyze it, pray, even, about, you know, these people. But I felt that the Lord said: No! Enough. And actually he sent these anarchists, that we were supposed to go to—he sent them to our doorstep. And they said, I have a piece of marble. Because marble in Greece is cheap, and our stairs are covered by

marble and they were breaking the marble, throwing. . . It was full of marble in the church. And I kept a piece of it, because for me that was like an invitation. And it was not an invitation by the anarchists; it was an invitation by God to leave our comfort zone. So the first thing that we see here is that God loves Paul so much not to allow him to be complacent in what he knows, where he's successful, where he feels confident.

So let's move to the second point. (OK, there is a clock, but I'll just ignore it.) The second point is that we need, as we now follow God outside our comfort zone, we need to trust God. As we walk step by step we need to trust God. I mean, OK, now we move out. We need to trust God step by step. Now let's see why we say that. I mean, it's interesting that Paul eventually gets a vision by God, a vision that says to him, "Do that." Wouldn't it have been better for Paul if he had had that kind of a vision at the beginning of the trip? I mean obvious things that Randy read: He went there and there, the other. . . I mean, there were no cars, no airplanes, back then. That cost time, money. It was not an easy thing. And many times we wonder why God didn't say to Paul right from the beginning: Paul, here is the plan. You know, we love plans. I mean, you love plans. Us Greeks, we don't. I always say that when Americans set foot on Greece the first thing they ask is: OK, what is the schedule? And I say to them, Listen, the only thing that I can tell you for sure about the schedule is that it is going to change. But here, you see, it's interesting that God is not giving Paul a plan, but he guides him step by step. He tries to go there; God says no. He tries to go there; God says no. And then at the very end God shows up in a vision. And why is that? Why is God playing with that? Is God trying to make our lives miserable and difficult? No.

There is this interesting observation if we read these verses. In verse 6 we read that Paul tried to do something, and—notice with me—the Holy Spirit said no. In verse 7 Paul tries to do something—and I don't know if you noticed that—the Spirit of Jesus says no. And eventually in verse 10 God the Father sends this vision where he shows Paul where he's supposed to go. What happens is this: God wants us to appreciate him and get to know him in his fullness. And many times we need to go through this step by step, trusting him, in order to understand who God is. At the end of this enterprise Paul didn't have a project or a plan, but he was trusting or following a person, and he has gotten to really know in depth this person, God. But Paul may not have a plan at the end. It's interesting that when he goes to sleep—by the next verse we see that Paul eventually goes to sleep—and there it's very interesting if you read in verse 13. . . Paul, by the way, he had a plan. If we read the first verse, Paul thinks that now for the next year or so, for the next period of time, he will stay in Asia and work with the Diaspora Jews. So he also has Timothy get circumcised in order to do that. That was his plan. And then God destroyed everything, you know, tear apart all the plans. In the meantime Paul got to know God in a deeper way, and then he learns his lesson. He goes to Philippi and we read in verse 13, Paul saying—I mean Luke saying about Paul, that on a Sabbath, when outside the city, and there is a very interesting Greek word there: *enomizomen*, which means we're guessing, not sure, hoping, believing, feeling. All of a sudden Paul, who has everything under control, he realizes that it's not about your planning, it's about God's sovereignty and God's providence. He has a plan.

It's interesting that when he goes to Troas, Paul, there is a slight change. I don't know if you've noticed that. Notice it with me in verse 10—Chapter 16, verse 10: "When he saw the vision..." Third person singular. "When he saw the vision, immediately we sought to go out." First person plural. I don't know if you've noticed that. There is this little change. Up to this point all the

narrative is: he did, he did, he did. From that point on it's all: we did, we did. What does that mean? Paul meets Luke in Troas, and Luke joins Paul. In the, you know, the interpretation of Acts we call it the "we passages," the "we passages." From that point on it's not 'he did it' but 'we did it.' I mean, God had a plan. God had a plan. And we need to trust God in the details of our lives, especially when God, you know, says no or when God sends us to this place. And many times we don't do that.

There is the best definition I've ever read. It comes from a book called *Total Church*. There are many good things in that book and many difficult things in that book, but there is this nice definition. "Being missional means ordinary people doing ordinary things with gospel intentionality." And I should add, ordinary people doing ordinary things and there's God's intentionality So wherever you are, whatever you do, whoever you are, is not an accident; it's God's plan, and there is a purpose for that.

Let's move to the third point. The third thing that we need to keep in mind as we read this passage is that in order to be on a mission we need to follow God outside our comfort zone, we need to trust God every step of the way. The third point is that we need to honor God as we are willing to enter, even though we're scared to death to enter, into new territory. It's moving into the unknown. Here is the situation. Imagine that you're going to be a missionary. And, you know, you're not sure where. And you may have some ideas and you pray and you pray. You close your eyes and you pray, you pray, you pray. And you say Lord, reveal to me where, you know, where you want me to go, and I'll follow you. I'll do whatever you say. And you pray, you pray, and you open your eyes and you find yourself miraculously in an airport, and you are holding something. You look at it, and it is a ticket for Athens, Greece. I mean, what would you think? OK, this is a hunch as to where God is leading me.

So the same thing happens with Paul. Sometimes we don't realize that. When eventually Paul, after God leading him, ends up in Troas, it is as if Paul is in an airport holding a ticket for Athens, Greece. Because Troas is a famous place; it's a port—it's the main port that you exit Asia to enter into Europe. The main port. The reason you go to Troas is because you're going to travel from Asia—I mean in the ancient times. We have stories about Xerxes, you know, the king of Persia. When he wanted to conquer Greece he went to Troas, and he had three night visions—you see the similarities—three night visions to build a bridge and go over. And then when Alexander the Great—our Alexander the Great—he wanted to go the other direction, you know, to go from Greece to Asia. Again, guess where he entered Asia? From Troas. Troas is that little place on the map that tells you: From here you go to Europe. So Paul knows. I mean, when he is in Troas, he got the message. God brought him there. Paul, you're supposed to enter into Europe, into the West. And Paul is scared. He needs a vision. Many times we think *Oh, if I had a vision*. I mean, that is not a flattering thing for Paul. I mean, it was so obvious. But Paul—it's not that he didn't get it; it's not that he didn't know what he was supposed to do; but he was scared to do that. Many times you don't think of Paul like that, but that's what it is. He was scared. And God had to send a vision and send a Macedonian man who says—you know, what else do you expect?—OK, come over, come over.

Why? Because it was a step into the unknown. Before, he knew. He knew how to handle it. He spoke the same language. He understood the customs. You know, it was it was a familiar territory. But now it is the unknown. And the only way that you honor God is when you are

ready to step into the unknown. And sometimes it's scary and it is. And you don't really know; you don't have all the answers. But you go. Why? Because this is the best way and the only way to honor God.

I mentioned a little bit earlier about the refugee crisis. In the summer of 2015 the Greece [???]. Every day thousands of people were passing by. And I'll tell you, I felt at the beginning of that summer very tight [tired?] with all the church planting and being a pastor in a large church and all that. And many times people were asking me what is the next step? And I said, you know, step back. And I remember we're on a vacation and we got the news about the refugee crisis, and the refugees coming or going, and I was praying Lord, take that away. You know, I hope it's not going to last. I hope it is just a few days. You know, we cannot deal with that. And I remember the first time that we went into the square at the beginning of the crises. All the refugees, they would end up on one of the islands. They would leave Turkey, go to the island, stay for a while, and then come to Athens, stay in a big square—it's called Victoria Square. Thousands of people just living outside there on the square before they would get, like, a way to go up and then leave the country. So thousands of people are sitting—I remember entering that square for the first time and seeing all these people. You know, I wanted to ignore them. If there was a way to say, you know, take that away. . .

But you know what? Many times you don't need to close your eyes to see a vision. You simply need to keep them open. Hmm? Many times you don't need to close your eyes to see the Macedonian man to give you. . . Just keep them open. And you will see many people and many opportunities calling to you. Perhaps you may see them as you will exit this door, or perhaps the Lord may. . . But you know what? We're scared, because we don't know what that is and how you do it and what will entail and you're scared. But the only way that you honor God is to be on a mission.

The last question. Three points, but always there is a last one. And that is why should I do that. I mean, this is crazy, isn't it? To leave your comfort zone, to enter into the unknown territory that you're not familiar. You are scared to enter with God not explaining the whole plan and we're just entering. Why would you do such a thing? The answer is because God has done the exact same thing for you in Jesus Christ. God never asks us to do something that he himself has not done before already for us. Jesus Christ left his comfort zone, left his comfort zone, and he came to us, obeying the plan of the Father—with the only difference he was not entering into an unknown territory. Into a hostile territory, yes, but not into. . . He knew exactly where he was going. He knew that he was going to the cross to glorify God and to bring blessing to us. So Jesus Christ, he has done that for us. And the only reason why we should consider being on a mission is because when we look at the cross we see a God who was on a mission for our sake.

So I pray that you will be. . . I pray that you wouldn't have to go through what we have gone through here, being—actually they broke the windows of our church three times. Three times. And the third time I said to the board of the elders let's not fix it. So we had the Sunday service with all the windows broken and we had the tape [???] And I said during the service, OK, look at that. How many more times? How many more times do we have to go through that in order to get it, to get it. So I pray that the Lord will give you a passion for his kingdom wherever you are. It may lead you to really unknown territories. It may lead you to places that you have never

envisioned that you will be. Just leave your comfort zone, whatever that is. For he said he has done that for you.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for Jesus Christ. We are humbled as we see his suffering and his determination and his love for us in his willingness to come to be on the cross for our sake and for your glory. And Lord, we pray that you may make us people who follow the Lamb, wherever he goes. Make us people who will be willing to leave our own comfort zone and trust in you, entering into wherever you are calling us, even though we are scared. Lord, make us people who glorify you by the way we live, act, and behave. In Jesus' name we pray, as I pray for blessing on this church and Randy, all the leaders, all the people. Use us for the sake of your kingdom. Amen.