Believe in the Lord Jesus

Acts 15:36-16:40

Key Verse:16:31 “They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”

We are currently witnessing a global crisis caused by the pandemic COVID-19. International travels are banned, schools are closing, and the market is crashing. The quantity of infected is rapidly increasing in America and around the world. Let us earnestly pray that God may stop the spread of the virus and heal those who are suffering and dying because of it. In the Bible there are several cases which God sent plagues to the people as his punishment of their sins. God sent plagues to the Egyptians because of King Pharaoh’s stubborn refusal to God’s command for the release of the Israelites. (Ex 9:1-7 ) God also warned to send plagues to the Israelites who had rebelled against him. (Nu 14:11-12) In these devastating plagues we learn God’s divine redemptive purpose for his people. God sent the plagues so that people might know that he is the LORD and they might repent and turn their hearts to the LORD. Through the punishment God wanted to make them strong and healthier than before. In Nu 14:12 the LORD God says, “*I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they*.” The LORD also said in 2 Chronicles 7:13-14, “*When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land*.” Therefore we don’t have to panic or be anxious because of the virus. All things are in God’s control. He will protect his people. Let us repent of our sins and ask for forgiveness so that God may stop the virus and heal this land. Amen! Above all, God will make this country healthier and stronger than before after this global crisis. In Chinese characters the word ‘crisis’( 危機 ) is composed of two letters signifying, ‘danger’, and ‘opportunity.’ Opportunity comes after danger is gone. When we are in danger, God uses it as an opportunity to make us better.

Today’s passage is the story about Paul’s second missionary journey, specifically his ministry in Philippi. In his second missionary journey we learn how Paul turned his danger into opportunity for the gospel. Above all we learn how the Holy Spirit directed Paul’s journey and how Paul obeyed the Holy Spirit. Amen!

After hearing the decision of the Jerusalem Council regarding the requirement of circumcision and observing Moses’ law for the gentile believers, the Antioch church was filled with joy and spirit. The gentile believers did not need to be circumcised for their salvation because salvation came from faith in Jesus, not from circumcision, by God’s grace alone, not by observing the law. (15:9,11) Some time later Paul suggested Barnabas to revisit the churches which they had established during their first missionary journey and to see how the believers doing. (36) Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them because Mark was his cousin. But Paul didn’t think it wise to take him, because Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. (13:13,15:38) Paul thought that Mark was not suitable for a longer and more strenuous trip than before. Paul and Barnabas had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, their hometown, and Paul chose Silas and left for Syria and Cilicia on foot.

Here we wonder about their separation. We applauded their beautiful co-working during their first missionary journey. We desired to see it again for the second journey. But they parted company because of the disagreement concerning choosing partners. We can’t blame anyone because each had their own ideas. Maybe it was time for them to depart according to God’s plan. God might have had different plans that they did not know. Separation is painful to everyone and not recommendable, but it often happens. But we believe that in all things and in all situations God works for good for those who love him. (Ro 8:28) When men mess up, God will fix the mess. God turns crises into opportunity for better result. God was going to use both Paul and Barnabas preciously and separately in different areas for different people. Later Barnabas, who went to Cyprus, became the first glorious martyr in his hometown.

Paul and Silas came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where they met a young man named Timothy. (16:1) Timothy was spoken well of by his people. His mother was a Jewess named Eunice and his father was a Greek. Timothy should be the fruit of Paul’s first missionary journey. Paul wanted to take Timothy along on the journey, so he circumcised Timothy because of the Jews who lived in that area. Paul did not want any possible opposition and unnecessary conflict between the Jews because of Timothy’s circumcision. Paul was free from the law, but he chose to become a man under the law to win over those who are under the law. Paul and his companion traveled from town to town, and they delivered the decisions of the Jerusalem Council. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers. (4-5)

Look at verses 6-8. “***Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.***” In these verses we learn that Paul changed his journey plan from Asia to Europe because of the intervention of the Holy Spirit. Paul and his companion wanted to go to Phyrgia and Galatia, northern area from Lystra. But the Holy Spirit did not allow them. So they moved to west and entered into the border of Mysia. There they wanted to enter Asia through Bithynia, northeastern part of Mysia. Paul might have desired to preach the word in the area of the Black Sea. But the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to either. We don’t know how the Spirit of Jesus stopped them. The road to Bithynia was probably closed or Silas was probably strongly opposed to Paul’s plan. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas, a port city of Aegean Sea. Paul’s ponderings about the intervention of the Holy Spirit over their trip was resolved that night. Look at verse 9. “***During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us***.” In his vision Paul recognized the Macedonian who was begging for Paul’s urgent help. “*Come over to Macedonia and help us*.” Paul accepted it as God’s direction, and the next morning he and his companions including Luke, who joined at Troas, immediately left for Macedonia.

Here we learn something important in doing the work of God and in living as God’s people. When we realize that what we plan and intend to do does not please God, we have to turn around immediately seeking God’s will. When Paul realized that the Spirit of Jesus did not allow him to go to Asia, he immediately turned to Macedonia. If something does not go well as you expect, reconsider whether your plans are for God’s will or your will. If the Holy Spirit will not allow you to continue, stop and follow wherever God directs you. Denying your will and following the Holy Spirit is the way to success and the key to blessing as Christians and in doing the work of God. Amen!

A historian said that Paul carrying the gospel to Macedonia gave birth to the civilization of Europe. Macedonia was the door to Europe in Paul’s day. In the future the gospel which was carried by Paul through his missionary journeys conquered Rome, and through the Roman Roads the seed of the gospel spread to every corner of the world. We believe that the Holy Spirit led Paul and his companion to Macedonia because of this bigger plan, the salvation of the world through the Roman Roads. This reminds me of Isaiah 55:8-9 which says, “*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts*.” Amen.

In the Bible the way of God’s work always starts from one person who seems to be insignificant. Then God worked through him to further His great master plan. God called one person Abraham and started the work of salvation through his life of faith. God called Moses for Exodus and Paul for world mission. Above all God sent Jesus as a baby in a manger. In Philippi, the leading city of Macedonia and the gate for Europe, Paul and his companion met a lady named Lydia. Because there was no synagogue in Philippi, they had a prayer meeting and lecture by the river, where some women gathered. Among the women God opened the heart of Lydia, a well-to-do business woman, to respond to Paul’s message. She was a worshiper of God. (14) After being baptized with her family members by Paul, she invited Paul and his journey team to her house, saying, “***If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house.***” (15) In this way Lydia’s house became the first church in Europe and she became the first European converter by Paul. Later Paul and Silas stayed at her house after being released from the prison. (40) So a preacher and evangelist must value one person as they value the whole world. The conquest of Europe by the gospel started from the conversion of a business woman, Lydia.

In 16:16-24 Paul and Silas healed a fortune telling slave girl from demon possession. After hearing Paul’s message, the girl began to follow him shouting, “***These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.***” (17) She told the truth by the power of the evil spirit, but her testimony only annoyed Paul’s ministry. Paul rebuked the evil spirit, which left her right away. (18) When her owner realized that he couldn’t make any money from his slave girl, he stirred up the crowd, falsely accused Paul and Silas, and handed them over to the city officials, who severely beat them and put them into a prison. (19-24) Paul and Silas’ feet were fastened in the stocks. They were thrown into the inner cell. Their inner cell was not like a modern prison with window and beds, but a dark dungeon without light. What do people usually do in this situation? Many become fearful and sorrowful. What did Paul and Silas do in the dark dungeon? Look at verse 25. “***About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them***.” Peter was sleeping between two soldiers in a prison.(12:6) Paul and Barnabas prayed and sang hymns to God. They were not fearful or sorrowful, but thankful to God for such a suffering for Christ. What happened next? **Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose.** (26) A miracle happened! This did not mean that their singing was loud enough to bring an earthquake, but that God created an earthquake to open the prison doors. We remember the power of prayer and hymns through Joshua and the Israelites when they marched around the wall of Jericho. (Jos 6:20) At that time the wall of Jericho was an invincible fortress to the Israelites who had to conquer the Promised Land. But the wall was too thick to penetrate and too high to climb up. But when they obeyed God’s word and shouted, the wall collapsed. In the same way no matter how difficult situation we may be in, when we pray and praise, walls will collapse and doors will be opened. Our prayers open the doors to heaven and reach the throne of God. Therefore, do not become fearful or sorrowful when we are in darkness. Even though our two hands and two feet are chained, don’t give up, but pray and praise. Praise the Lord aloud until doors are opened and chains fell off! Amen!

The jailor woke up, and when he found that the prison doors were opened, he tried to kill himself, thinking that all the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, “***Don’t harm yourself! We are all here***!” (28) The jailor asked Paul and Silas, “***Sirs, what must I do to be saved?***” (30) The jailor saw what God had done, and he had the fear of God. He acknowledged Paul and Silas as men of God and asked them for the way of salvation. How did Paul reply him? Look at verses 31. “***They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”*** Paul did not lose the chance to deliver the message of salvation to the jailor. When he believed in Jesus, he and his household would be saved. Believing in Jesus is the way to salvation. Jesus said in John 14:6, “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” Believing in Jesus brings not only personal salvation, but also family, community, country, and world salvation.

Paul continued to speak the word of the Lord to the jailor and to all the others in his house. The jailor and all his household were baptized that night.(32-33) Verse 34 repeats the family salvation in this, “***The jailor brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.***” What Paul proclaimed came to reality---he and his household were saved. In this way the prison became a Bible study room, and the jailor’s house became a house church. God turned Paul’s imprisonment into family salvation. God changed Paul’s crisis into the great opportunity for him to preach the gospel to many people in the prison and in the house. Next morning Paul and Silas were released, and they came back to Lydia’s house. (40)

In today’s passage we learn that we don’t have to become fearful or sorrowful when we face danger or hardships. Opportunity will come after danger. We must use every opportunity to preach the good news of salvation to those who are suffering from fear of death. Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you and your household will be saved! Let us pray and sing hymns loudly until doors are opened and chains fell off. Amen!