

Sermon File # 913

Scripture Text: Acts 16:6-10

Sermon Title: *When at a Standstill*

Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and sermon preached

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**For additional information regarding this manuscript, contact
Roger.Roberts@ibcbrussels.org**

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When at a Standstill

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Acts 16:6-10. Last Sunday we noted how Paul and Barnabas, on their first missionary journey, reached those who were receptive to the message of Jesus, changing their strategy with a new determination to focus on the Gentiles, the pagan outsiders, rather than devoting their time to the non-receptive Jews, the religious insiders. Paul and Barnabas made significant advances with the message of Jesus during this first mission venture into Asia Minor (modern-day Southern Turkey), even though Paul suffered opposition and even persecution, being stoned nearly to death in Lystra.

This success in evangelizing pagan Gentiles caused some strict Jewish believers concern that these converted Gentiles would disregard their cherished Jewish traditions. Acts 15 records the first church council, held in Jerusalem, which was for the purpose of reaching a compromise between these strict adherents to Jewish tradition and the evangelists and their new converts from paganism. That Jerusalem Council gives a good model on how a Christian assembly can discern and decide the will of God in the right spirit of harmony.

At the close of Acts 15 is the account of Paul and Barnabas' disagreement over Barnabas' young cousin, John Mark, who had abandoned Paul and Barnabas

during Paul's first mission venture (13:13). This "sharp disagreement" (15:39) resulted in Paul's and Barnabas' going separate ways on their next mission ventures. Barnabas took Mark with him and Paul chose Silas as his new partner in mission. (It's important to note that this rift was not permanent, and later on Paul called specifically for Mark's assistance and commended him as a great help: 2 Timothy 4:11.)

On Paul's second missionary venture, he and Silas were joined also by Timothy, who probably had been converted during Paul's first venture into Asia Minor. In our text for today for the first time Luke, the writer of Acts, uses the pronoun "we" (verse 10). Thus, Paul had invited Luke, who also was a physician (Colossians 4:14), to accompany them. With all of Paul's physical ailments, Luke would have been an invaluable companion during these travels. Our text describes Paul and his mission team having arrived in the city of Troas, at an important crossroads, at a standstill, and gives us some insights about how we should respond when we find ourselves at a standstill.

Follow as I read **Acts 16:10-16**.

The word "standstill" is defined as "a state characterized by absence of motion or of progress: STOP" is the metaphor (*Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*). Paul and his mission team were at a standstill in Troas. They had been making progress and advances in declaring the saving message of the risen Jesus, winning converts on their way. But now they find themselves in the city of Troas, basically at a standstill. Paul's strategy, which made perfectly good sense in including some key population centers to the north and to the south, was nullified by the Lord, speaking through the Holy Spirit. And Paul and his companions found themselves at a standstill.

In the history of God's people, a standstill is a time when God reveals a new direction and enables his people to move forward in a new direction. The people of the First Covenant, when God through Moses led them out of Egypt, came to a standstill at the Red Sea. They were in a place when God alone could deliver them and give a way of escape from the pursuing Egyptians (Exodus 14). As a child of God I find comfort in the fact that when I am at a standstill and it seems I have no options for my future, God and God alone can act in my behalf. At such times of standstill I'm aware of my total dependence on God's deliverance and guidance.

Some of us here today may find ourselves at a standstill with our careers, our vocation and our future plans. Maybe because of the current financial crisis your future plans, perhaps even your entire career, are put "on hold." You may be here in Belgium and your hoped-for dreams and plans simply have not materialized. Everything you had anticipated has come to a grinding halt. This may be true also for some of you students, wondering what your next step should be. Some of us may be facing a bewildering series of choices, none of which

seem all that good. We're at an important crossroads. (I'm reminded of a quip from the American baseball player, who was legendary for his simplistic and often non-sensical quotations. Said Yogi Berra, "When you come to a crossroads in life, take it!"

Paul and his missionary colleagues were at a major crossroads, and found themselves at a standstill, not knowing where and not even how to move forward. But as we look at their situation and their resultant action, we'll learn what we too should do when at a standstill in our lives. There is a sense in which every day, even throughout the day, we may find ourselves at a standstill, not certain what we should do and when our next step, decision, or action should be taken. Our standstill may be due to circumstances beyond our control or may be due to our loss of incentive or desire to move forward in our spiritual life.

Whatever alternatives or hindrances you and I may be facing at this moment in our lives, we can learn that when we're at a standstill we can and must...

➤ **Follow the Spirit (verses 6-8)**

The Apostle Paul was not one to ignore or even disregard the importance of planning. We know from his letters, for example, that he planned to visit Rome (Romans 1:11-13). But we soon learn that God's plans overrule ours, and always for good, if for unbeknown and even sometimes bewildering reasons.

Paul and his companions had strategic plans to go in a southwesterly direction; then they attempted to turn north, but that way also was blocked. The only option left open to them was to continue to the northwest, where they eventually found themselves at a standstill in the city of Troas. These missionaries were in Troas because God said "no" to their plans.

As we look at the experience of these men we can see how we follow God's Spirit...

- *When God says "no"*

What we see at work in the experience of these missionaries is what AT Pierson called God's "double guidance," whereby he prevents us through a negative experience from going a certain direction and then compels us in a positive way to take another option (quoted by John RW Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts*, page 261. Stott also remarks that some of the great men in the history of missions had plans that were cancelled by God, who led them in an unexpected direction: Livingstone, Carey, Judson, et al. We can only imagine the impact on world missions had the original plans of these great pioneers not been interrupted and nullified by God's intervention).

It's interesting that in this short text Luke "involves" the entire Trinity in God's leadership, with the Holy Spirit in verse 6, the Spirit of Jesus in verse 7 and God the Father in verse 10 (See John B Polhill, *Acts: an Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, page 345). God is fully involved in our lives, including in the negative experiences. Luke doesn't give any details about how the Holy Spirit kept them from going southwest and also how the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to go northeast. We can conjecture that he may have used some sort of legal opposition or problems with health. But more than likely, in the final analysis of things, they sensed the leading of God within their spirits.

This worldwide financial crisis may become for many the voice of God saying "no" to personal and business plans and unchecked ambition. It could be a way for God to stop plans that would take our focus away from what is really important, such as seeking his kingdom and giving him the priority of our finances and our time investment.

When at a standstill we need to remember that the will and direction of God is not something he hides from us until we somehow unlocked the secret code by some secret, esoteric knowledge or "gnosis," as in a Gnostic-like pursuit of the Holy Grail (a la *The Divinci Code*). God wants us to know and follow his will and purposes much more than we do. As Henry Blackaby teaches, God's will is known to us through the Holy Spirit, who speaks to us through Scripture, prayer, the church (God's Spirit-led people) and through circumstances (*Experiencing God*).

When at a standstill, this is a time to seek out wise and godly counsel from people who love us and who desire God's best for us. Often such friends can see our situation and our giftedness and God's leading from a perspective that's clearer than our own. Also, God speaks through circumstances, like doors closing to a job opportunity that seemed just perfect for us. God may use ill health as a negative circumstance that will prevent us from going a certain direction or from staying in a certain place beyond God's timing for us. But we also need to remember that not every open door has been opened by God. Satan will show us open doors as well, and we must bring to bear upon these open doors of opportunity the needed confirmation from God's Word, the wisdom of the church, and the peace of God as we pray and seek to hear from him.

Sometimes in our reading of the Word, we become aware that God is closing the way to a certain direction in our lives. Obviously, for us to disobey a teaching that is clear to us in Scripture is to willfully disobey. As we pray about a certain matter, God will give us a spirit of uneasiness and unsettled-ness about a certain matter. This could be part of what Paul means about the peace of Christ ruling in our hearts (Colossians 3:15). I think that in the final analysis, this was how the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Jesus prevented Paul, giving these missionaries God's negative leading, saying "no" to these options.

Again, it's important to remember that as followers of Jesus our greatest and most frequent choices will not involve choosing between the good and the flagrantly evil. Our decisions will involve choosing God's best over what seems logical to us. Paul and his companions could have "plowed ahead" to the southwest and the northeast, but God's anointing and fullness of blessing would not have been upon them because they would not have been joining God in his work. Instead, they would have been "working for God" in their power, which is a huge and sometimes tragic difference.

At a standstill, we are to actively wait upon God, who will give us his leading. We then follow his leading...

- *When God says "yes"*

We don't know how long we will have to remain at a standstill, at our "Troas," but when we wait upon the Lord, i.e. actively seek his face and to know his leading, he will show the way in positive leadership.

My father, when advising me as a young man about whether to consider a possible call to serve another church, told me that when God leads there usually seems to be both a push and a pull. God allows negative circumstances to awaken us to the fact that just maybe God is getting our attention and is ready to move us in a new direction. (Although this is not always the case, since sometimes God's will is to teach us perseverance in difficult places, which is what Paul seemed to refer to in 1 Corinthians 16:9. For Paul there God's open door of opportunity and great opposition were not mutually exclusive). But there is also, said my Baptist minister father, a pull, an attraction to a new place of service.

So, God came to Paul in a nighttime vision of a man from Macedonia asking him for help. Theories about who this man might have symbolized are mere speculation. All that mattered was it was a Macedonian and God was pointing Paul and his associates to this new frontier for the message of Jesus. This vision led to a breakthrough of taking the good news to Europe (See Polhill, cited above, pages 345f).

Being at a standstill is God's opportunity to act, to show us the way to a new direction. We can be certain that God is not idle, but is rather actively making himself known around us and all over the world. He is also, in the words of Henry Blackaby, pursuing a love relationship with us and wants us to join him in that relationship and in the work he is inviting us to do with him. And when our hearts are open and submissive to him, he makes his will and way clear. It bears up under the scrutiny of the voice of the Spirit through prayer and the Word and also through the counsel of godly people and confirming circumstances. And there is that peace within our hearts that God is leading us to join him (Colossians 3:15).

Whatever your life situation and shattered dreams that may lie in your wake as you wait during your standstill, by the grace of God the best is yet to be. Years ago I read a sermon on this text by a famous liberal preacher named Harry Emerson Fosdick, titled, "Handling Life's Second Bests." His thesis was that by wrong choices and difficult circumstances we can be sidetracked from God's best and so we will simply have to accept life as it is and make the most of it (*20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, vol. IX, pages 56-62). But this seems to deny God's grace and his sovereignty over our sins, mistakes and circumstances. He can take our broken lives and shattered dreams and give us the fullness of his joy and a new purpose, even for our blemished history. Redemption means the transformation of an inglorious past into a glorious future. The narrative of our past failures can weave a story of grace that God can use to touch the lives of many who are themselves in new of hope and a promising future.

What is important for all of us is that we realize, as did Paul and his colleagues, that God is with us in Troas, as we wait during our standstill. And it's better to be with him at a standstill than to be without him anywhere else. And, as did Paul and his team...

- *We must simply trust and obey*

As soon as Paul received the vision of the Macedonian, the group got ready to move out toward Macedonia, with the conviction that this was God's will and direction for them. When God makes his will known, it's up to us to obey. Even to delay, to postpone what God has shown us is our assignment, is to disobey. If there is any reluctance to obey, any besetting sin or ongoing disobedience, it's futile to attempt to know God's will. He will not reveal himself and his best for us if we are unwilling to give our all to him and fully receive his forgiveness and follow his Lordship. To get off dead center in our standstill, it's time to acknowledge and yield to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He will not entrust to us his assignment if we will not trust him as our Lord, leader and Master. He will not give us the best and fullness of himself if we hold back from him our best and ourselves.

Because the Lord knew the hearts of Paul and his missionary team members were willing to obey and to follow wherever he would lead, he gave Paul a vision of a man from Macedonia. They were ready to experience the next step in moving beyond their standstill, which was to...

➤ **Focus on people (verse 9)**

When Paul and his companions were at a standstill, it was a vision of a Macedonian that gave them a new direction. In all likelihood you and I will not receive a vivid vision during the night (although that is entirely possible), but it

seems instructive that it the vision of a person that God used to lead these missionaries in receiving their next assignment. The eyes and thoughts of these missionaries were not on themselves, on how life and circumstances could be better for them. Rather, they were focused on others.

Perhaps we all need occasional reminders of our priorities in Kingdom living. We live in a self-centered culture and even as Christians we easily become consumed with self-centered needs and goals. And I think that during a time of standstill in our lives, as we seek to know God's direction, we need to realize also that...

- *Others are foremost*

Through the communication of e-mail and the Internet, I have developed a long-distance friendship with newly-assigned missionaries in Taiwan. In fact, Dawn has claimed me as her pastor, a designation I'm honored to accept. She regularly reads my sermons on our church Website, and sometimes pastes my quotes into her own blog and Website. Recently Dawn experienced a very trying ordeal, struggling with homesickness; her own and also a child's prolonged and recurring illness; and difficulties with language and other cultural adjustments. She found encouragement through the word and prayer, but I think also through a greater love for the Taiwanese people. In her latest Website posting, Dawn shared how that God has renewed her sense of calling and joy in being in Taiwan through experiences with the people God has called her to serve.

Writes Dawn, "In these last few weeks, I have already witnessed His showers of grace and blessing in the smiling face of a tiny HIV orphan as I held him in my arms. Or the absolute wonder in the face of a young Taiwanese woman as she listened to the story of Jesus while sitting around a table at a church/missionary lead English program. We have also had many other missionaries & Taiwanese brothers and sisters who have come along side of us in prayer and help.

"So, we press on humbly in faith, through utter weakness to clinging to His strength alone...in prayer, repentance and in dependence, seeking Abba's love, grace and power...not only for ourselves, but for those around us in this place of God's calling."

It seems as if Dawn received a new sense of calling when, through her ministry to people, God lifted her eyes and heart from focusing on her pain and struggles, which were real and distracting and even disheartening. But when she held the orphan baby and shared with the young lady the message of Jesus, her calling, assignment and purpose for being in Taiwan came alive again. Dawn's testimony was a reminder to me of my purpose in being here in Belgium. And as we face some uncertain days ahead regarding our assignment, direction, clarity and assurance will come, not through introspection but rather through seeing what Jesus can see.

As he challenged his disciples following his invigorating, life-giving encounter with the woman at the well, “I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” (John 4:35). Jesus wasn’t talking about looking at wheat fields but at precious people, like this newly converted woman. Jesus’ own vision for his ministry was refocused and his heart was refreshed by his giving himself in ministry to this Samaritan woman. He had forgotten his own hunger and exhaustion (John 4:32ff).

When I read The Book of Acts and the letters of Paul, I realize that his focus was on the risen Lord Jesus but also upon others. This focus kept him from self-centeredness and worry and fretting about himself. He was reminded that God had called him to share the message and love of Jesus with others, even with those who opposed him.

God has a plan for our lives too and one way we can find the new direction he has for us is to focus on people. This includes people who sit around our dinner table. How can we serve them in Jesus’ name? Also, people in the workplace, the classroom, and the neighborhood are to be our focus. We then should believe that God has us exactly where we are supposed to be. And if we are at a standstill, we need to first ask, “Am I doing all I can do to be God’s servant to these people?” He has people for us to serve, and if not where we are right now, there will be people where he will lead us next. And we can be sure that anywhere we go...

- *People have needs*

The man of Macedonia called to Paul to come over and help him and others in his country. He had needs, and Paul and his companions were being called to meet those needs. The greatest need of the Macedonians is still the need of all Europeans and all the people of the entire world—for a life-changing everlasting destiny changing relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul and his companions met a diversity of needs in their ministry on these missionary journeys. The sick were healed and people were delivered from Satanic bondage.

There are many needs around us, and God will use us to meet these needs and to communicate his love to others. Providing for the needy in material ways, such as for food and clothing, shows the love of Jesus. Practicing friendship and hospitality are important, as well as English classes, ministries to young mothers and young international students. All of these show the love of Jesus, including your outreach and friendship-making in your personal living space. And Jesus cares about the immediate temporal needs of people, such as hunger and illness and injustice and suffering.

But also addressing these felt needs is an important step in gaining a hearing for the message of Jesus. We need to keep in mind that we’re not just to touch

people in a superficial way, but are rather to seek to lead these precious people into a life-changing, eternal relationship with Jesus.

We will be encouraged in this if we also bear in mind that...

- *People have potential*

Paul and his companions knew that the message of Jesus was “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). They would need to know this as they entered Macedonia and the city of Philippi, where they would meet a demon-possessed girl and then be thrown into jail, face angry mobs and then Paul would be challenged by scholars and philosophers in Athens (Acts 16-17).

Paul never forgot that he was an example of God’s power to transform the worst of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15f). And when we are at a standstill in our lives we must trust that he has placed people around us and will lead us to others who he will transform into new creations in Christ.

This may be an instructive word to all who are thinking you are at a dead-end, a standstill that has no promise for you because of the difficult people around you that you’ve written off as hopeless cases. Those of us here in this country, where the people seem so oblivious, if not overtly resistant, to the message of Christ, need to be aware of this. God’s power can change anyone, just as Paul and his companions believed and observed as they moved forward in their journey.

When we are at a standstill in our lives, we need simply, as did Paul and his companions, to...

➤ **Finish the journey (verse 10)**

Our text tells us that Paul and his colleagues, after Paul had seen the vision, got ready “at once” to leave for Macedonia (verse 10). When we find ourselves at a standstill, we need to remember that we too are, like Paul and company, on a journey called living and doing the will of God. We may be expatriates living in Belgium, but also we are all pilgrims on a greater journey, “looking forward to the city with foundations,” being “aliens and strangers on earth” (Hebrews 11:10,13). Whether we remain in our present location or move to another city and country, we are all on this journey of following God and our journey is to be done...

- *With cooperation with God’s people*

Now accompanied by Silas, Timothy and Luke, Paul is ready to set out on the continuation of his mission. And when you and I are at a standstill in our lives,

we must realize that we are not alone but are part of the family of God and are called to join in worship, fellowship and ministry with his people. As we noted earlier, one way we confirm the will and leading of God is through the Spirit's speaking through his church. There are others that God has placed around our lives to assist in our spiritual formation. The church is God's provision for his people, essential for our walk with God, which depends on corporate worship, fellowship, and sharing the task of making disciples.

I'm privileged to be called to serve as one that Eugene Peterson calls "an unnecessary pastor." I'm not very useful as an administrator or director of marketing and church growth strategies. The tasks to which God has called me largely go unnoticed, tasks such as prayer and sermon preparation and personal counsel with those seeking guidance and discipleship. The secular and even today's church world, particularly in North America, regards a spiritual-formation type pastor as essentially unnecessary, particularly in comparison with a church-growth, corporate manager and executive leader-type pastor.

As your pastor, I need you at least as much as you need me, as together we seek to move away from our times of spiritual stalemate into a new phase in our walk with God. And one thing we must do, as long as God allows us to be together, is to continue the journey...

- *With commitment to God's mission*

Paul and his companions were committed to the task to which they had been called. And we too are part of that Great Commission taskforce. To this end we are connected with a local church, which has been entrusted with an essential part of God's kingdom strategy of taking the message of Jesus to every nation, people group, tribe and language (Revelation 7:9).

We are all called to be witnesses for Jesus in the part of the world, the sphere of influence where he has placed us. So, even when we're at a standstill, we're on mission with him. And willingness to join in his mission is what will be our next assignment, even if it's to remain here in this place. When we join Jesus on mission we're never at a standstill. Even in this place we're always moving forward with the risen Lord Jesus. And he will enable us to do and to complete our mission, to be worthy representatives of Christ by godly lives and to share the message of Jesus, as he gives us opportunities. And we do this...

- *With confidence in God's leadership*

Our text ends with the statement that this missionary team concluded that God had called them and was leading them to preach the message of Jesus to the Macedonians (verse 10). They launched out into new territory with confidence in God's leadership.

We too can share that confidence that God will lead us. In fact, we can be certain right now that we are in the center of his will. That comes with complete surrender to him. Regardless of wrong turns or times of disobedience and past unbelief, we can begin anew with our redeeming God of great grace. He will lead us forward, with all of our broken-ness and we can move forward with total trust that God never commands what he does not also enable. God never asks us to go where he is not with us and also going before us.

Paul moved ahead on this journey and all the way to the end, receiving words of assurance and encouragement from the Lord himself that Paul would finish his journey and his assignment (e.g. Acts 23:11). You may have doubts, uncertainty and fears about your future, but if you will surrender all to Jesus' Lordship and control, he will lead you from your standstill to higher ground of kingdom living and serving.

I'm certain that for Paul and his companions Macedonia, what we call Europe today, was a daunting assignment for them. Yet because God had called they were ready to move forward with trust and confidence and a peace that surpasses understanding (Philippians 4:7).

Conclusion:

Maybe today you find yourself at a standstill. It seems to you, perhaps, that your life is going nowhere. Maybe your career that seemed so promising before is now looking like a dead-end street. Or maybe your relationships are getting nowhere and your future with people, or with your schooling, or your living here in Belgium are all in doubt. Or perhaps it's simply your personal walk with God seems to be at a standstill.

The fact is, God wants us always to be on pilgrimage, on a faith journey with him. Even if our physical location doesn't change, his will is that we are always moving forward with him, growing in him, joining him in mission to people all around us.

Our need is to simply follow the Spirit, through the negative and the positive pulls on our lives, and ask what the Spirit is saying through prayer, Scripture reading, the church and our circumstances. I too need to stop fretting about some negative circumstances in our lives, things beyond our control, and trust that God is sovereign over them and even working through them. We need to take our focus off ourselves and put our eyes on Jesus and on those he has placed around us. I know that missionary friend, Dawn, whom I mentioned earlier, was led, along with her husband Mike, to Taiwan as a missionary because of the love God placed in their hearts when they adopted a Taiwanese child.

You may find yourself today at a spiritual standstill, even though you continue going through the motions of religious routines, rituals and church attendance and activities. But today you realize the need to begin to seek God in a deeper relationship and to begin growing in your love for him and for others. The work we have to do is not only or even primarily church work. It's the work and growth of the kingdom of God within us. Each Lord's Day of Sabbath worship and rest can and should in a sense be a time of standstill, to allow us to reflect and refocus, regaining perspective and assurance of God's guidance in our lives.

And when we decide to finish the work, to keep following Jesus all the days of our earthly pilgrimage, Jesus will lead us off "dead center," away from our standstill, to do all he intends for us to do this side of eternity. I pray that for you and me, God will give grace to hear and immediately obey him as he leads us away from our standstill, to join him in the very center of his will.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What is your understanding of being at a standstill in life?
2. Have you been or are you now at a standstill in your life (perhaps in your education or career or living plans, or even in your personal spiritual growth)?
3. What does the experience of Paul and his colleagues in our text tell you about some principles we can follow when at a standstill?
4. How does God speak to us sometimes through negative circumstances?
5. What are positive ways that we can discover God's will and leadership?
6. What role do other people have in our understanding of God's will for our life and direction for our future? What is the role of the church when we find ourselves at a standstill and in need of God's direction?
7. What are some promises in Scripture that assure us of God's leadership as we seek to follow his will?

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