

# BELPRES CHURCH

## **Sermon: Follow the Leader**

Dr. Scott Dudley

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Well, thank you for participating in worship with us and joining us. We are grateful as we said at the beginning that the governor's mandate to stay at home does allow for an exception for us to have a small team of people here to live stream, so we're grateful for that and thank you. Thank you for joining us.

As a person who in my first career taught English literature and currently kind of does public speaking for a living. I think the five best speeches in the English language are Elizabeth The First Armada day speech 1588, Lincoln second inaugural 1865, Churchill's Dunkirk speech as well as their Finest Hour speech both in 1940, but I think the best speech ever given in the English language is Martin Luther King's I Have A Dream speech.

In a very difficult moment in American history, similar to what we are in now, that speech galvanized a nation to act on Civil Rights. It's an amazing speech, especially, especially since it was a speech that was never supposed to have happened. Dr. King had brought a different speech that day to give, and he was in the middle of giving that different speech that day when behind him on the platform an amazing gospel singer named Mahalia Jackson was right behind him and she was having none of those prepared remarks that Dr. King was giving. The Holy Spirit moved Mahalia Jackson and from behind him she shouts out to him, "Tell them about your dream, Martin. Tell them about your dream."

When Dr. King heard that he pushed aside the notes, his prepared text that he had been speaking from. He pushed aside his prepared text and his speechwriter saw him do it. Speechwriter leaned over to a friend and said, these people don't know it, but they're about to go to church, and then Dr. King improvised. It was all made up on the spot, that amazing, amazing speech and brought hope and healing to an entire nation.

The Holy Spirit nudged Mahalia Jackson and Dr. King, both of them all in followers of Jesus and they responded to the nudge of the Holy Spirit and brought all kinds of hope and healing and courage to a country that needed to hear it. Because when all in followers of Jesus surrender to the leading of the Holy Spirit, minute by minute, hour by hour, we experience uncrushable hope, unstoppable power and

March 29, 2020

undeniable healing, which we need right now for ourselves and which our country and our world desperately needs because it is a scary time, right?

Will I or someone I love get sick and have complications? Will I have my job? What's going to happen to my retirement fund and for you senior adults, oh my goodness, right? More at risk of this disease and maybe more isolated than ever. Senior adults, we want you to know that we are praying for you and we are ready to help you in any way that we possibly can. You can let us know if you need help for something on the Together At Home banner on our webpage, just go there and click on that. We are with you. It is a hard time. It's a hard time for all of us. High school students, college students had their plans completely up ended.

Now, there's some good things in it too. My two oldest are back from college and that's great. I have all three of my kids with me. That's awesome. We are enjoying being together, at least for now. But there's still lots of hard stuff, right? I'm an extrovert. I like being around people. This is killing me. This whole stay at home thing is killing me. I know, I know y'all think I'm an introvert because I'm shy, but that's not true. Introvert extrovert isn't about shy or not. It's about what gives you energy. People give me energy. I like crowds. I'm a shy extrovert. I really want to be with you, but I'm afraid of you at first. It's a special kind of crazy that goes on in here and just it's mine, right?

This is like this whole stay at home thing, no people, like it's just killing me. Some of you parents, you are trying to homeschool and do your job at the same time. Oh my goodness. I saw a post this week from a kid who was being homeschooled and it said this, "It is not going good. My mom's stressed out. My mom is really getting confused. We took a break so my mom can figure this stuff out. I am telling you it is not going good." Maybe that describes all of us at this point in one way or another.

Bell Press, Bell Press, we are people of hope. We are people of courage and we are the people who bring God's healing. All of that gets released when we follow the Holy Spirit's nudge, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. I want to look at a story where that happens in Acts chapter 16. Acts 16, the apostle Paul's on a journey to spread the good news about Jesus, but he encounters one obstacle after another and it shows what it looks like to follow Jesus minute by minute in a way that brings courage, power, hope, and healing, and that's what we all need right now.

Acts 16 starting in verse six, Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region or Phrygia, 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. Verse nine. That night, Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia begging him, come over and help us. After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia.

The first thing this story tells us is that following the Holy Spirit's leading in a way that we experience hope, power and courage means going on a journey where God does the driving, not us. Paul had all these plans, right? Plans to go to Phrygia and Bithynia and Mysia and other places you don't know how to pronounce, but he kept getting blocked at every turn. All of those places, if you look at a map, all those places were in what is today, the country of Turkey. But God tells Paul to go to Macedonia instead, which is in Greece. Instead of going East into Asia, God redirects Paul West into Europe. All of Paul's plans got wrecked.

March 29, 2020

Let me ask this. Did any of you have some plans for the next couple of weeks that have been wrecked? Like, I don't know everything, right? Like everything, right? Like graduations and weddings and I mean like everything. Every plan we had wrecked. I doubt any of us had penciled in for April live through pandemic, right? That probably wasn't on our calendar. All our plans had been wrecked. In this text, it doesn't say how. It doesn't tell us how Paul was blocked from going to those places. It says the spirit of Jesus wouldn't let him, but we don't know how that was made clear to Paul. Maybe it was certain circumstances or problems. Maybe it was even an epidemic and we don't know how long this lasted. All that wandering. It could have taken months while Paul was trying to figure it out, but God was guiding Paul to a bigger and better outcome, which we'll see later in the text. I do not think that God caused COVID-19, but I do believe that God is in COVID-19 steering, guiding us to better outcomes.

Now, the problem is, the problem is God only shows us the next step, right? Not the whole game plan, right. Paul, go to Macedonia. Then what? Just the next step, right? Not the whole plan, which I find frustrating, but I think God does that for two reasons. One, it's just more of an adventure when you don't know what's next. But second, it forces us to rely on him constantly, hour by hour, cause see if God gave me the 10 year plan for the next 10 years of my life, I would probably say, thank you God and then probably not check in with him till about 2030, but he doesn't do that. Instead, he just gives us one step at a time, which means that we have to be listening to him, praying to him, in relationship with him, hour by hour, minute by minute.

Through this whole thing. God, I am home. I can't see my friends. I'm stuck at home. God, what's my next step? Show me. God, I'm in this Zoom meeting right now and I'm also trying to handle kids. God, in this moment show me what my next move is. What is my next step? God, I don't know how to reach out to my neighbors. I don't know if they're okay. What's my next step, God? Show me my next step and then do it because here's the thing. When I am following the Holy Spirit's leading, I feel so incredibly close to God in those moments and it brings me courage and it brings me hope.

What's your next step? Be praying that constantly, and so many of you are doing this, responding to the nudge of the Spirit. 90 of you signed up to help to provide food for needy families to this COVID crisis. 90 of you. That means we've been able to expand the number of families that we are going to serve from 60 to 120. Thank you.

A woman in our church ordered a bunch of pizzas to be delivered to nurses at Overlake Hospital to encourage them because man, their job is hard right now. When Domino's pizza found out what it was for, they insisted on selling them to her at cost. She assured us in her email that even though she's a very social person, very outgoing. She said, just so you know, we arranged for curbside delivery. It's not easy, but I'm trying to behave, right.

We've had some kids sign up to be pen pals with senior adults who are isolated. Thank you. We'd love to have even more kids sign up so that we can connect with our senior adults who are feeling very isolated right now. If you want to sign up, you can go to the Together At Home banner on our website and sign up for that.

So many of you are following the nudge of the Holy Spirit. I know it raises the question like, okay, well how do I know if it's the Spirit nudging me or the taco ate for lunch? We check in with other Christians.

March 29, 2020

We check it with scripture, but you know what? Right now, if it is moral, ethical, and legal, just do it. Just do it and see what God does with it. Follow the nudge of the Holy Spirit. That's what Paul does.

He goes to Macedonia and then it says that on the Sabbath, we went to the river to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. Then, she and the members of our household were baptized. What's going on here is Paul is looking for a synagogue, but it takes 10 Jewish men to form a synagogue. Women couldn't form a synagogue.

Paul, all he finds is a group of women, which in that culture would have seemed like a dead end because women were considered second class citizens. But Paul surrenders his cultural assumptions and that group of women become followers of Jesus and formed the first church in Europe. What this shows is that in order to experience the courage, power, and hope of Jesus as we follow him step-by-step, we need to really trust and believe that with Jesus, what looks like nothing may be the start of a very big something. Where other people would have seen just a group of women. Paul saw the first church in Europe. With Jesus, what looks like nothing to us may be a new beginning, the start of something very, very big.

COVID-19 has looked like a dead end for a lot of things, right? There's a lot of things that COVID-19 has brought a dead to, at least for right now, but one of the questions I keep asking myself is what can God do with this? I keep thinking to myself, if I come out of this the same man that I was three weeks ago, I will have missed what God is trying to do in my life through this. If we come out of this the same church that we were three weeks ago, we will have missed what God is trying to do with us corporately in the life of our church. It feels like a dead end, but it may be new beginnings to all kinds of stuff. With Jesus, what looks like a dead end is a new beginning to something big.

They formed this first church in Europe. Paul decides to stick around for awhile. The story continues. Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She followed Paul and the rest of us shouting, "These men are servants of the most high God who are telling you the ways to be saved." She kept us up for many days. Finally, Paul became so annoyed that he turned and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus, I command you to come out of her." At that moment, the spirit left her.

This is one of my favorite stories in the Bible, right? Because this woman is basically heckling Paul while he's preaching and it says, finally he got so irritated he just turned around and like in the name of Jesus shot up, right? That's how you know this is not a made up story, like this is a real story because if this were made up, it would say something like Paul, filled with compassion, healed her. This is an eye witness account and what it shows is that in order to have hope, courage, and power, we need to silence the fiend who lies like truth.

The fiend who lies like truth. That is a phrase from Shakespeare's Macbeth to describe the devil who so often will tell us something that's only partially true, a half truth, but without the full context so that we are led astray or tells us something that sounds true, but it isn't true.

The slave girl says, these men are servants of the most high God. That could refer to the God of the Bible, but probably people assume she was talking about Zeus. They were in Greece after all, right.

March 29, 2020

Technically, she was saying the right thing, but she was saying it in a way to lead people astray. We need to silence the fiend who lies like truth.

For instance, news sources and social media that are filled with dire predictions or little bits of truth, but without key context or things that sound true, but are just flat out false. We need to silence those voices. We were talking about this in my small group this week on our Zoom small group and one of the guys in my small group came up with a great challenge for us. This is your homework this week, Bell Press. This is your homework. Spend more time every day, spend more time reading the Bible, praying, listening to worship than you do on social media and the news. That's your homework. However much time in a day you spend on social media and the news, spend even more time in prayer, scripture and listening to worship music.

Download the Bible app. It has all kinds of reading plans that can help you. Make phone calls, video chats with people that encourage you, reminds you of God and points you to him. If you need help with the technology, we got a lot of young people here. They know how this stuff works. If you need help, again Together At Home banner on our webpage, let us know. We'll get a young person to call you and help you with that.

Listen to worship music, sermons at home, be here every Sunday. We're going to bring you worship every Sunday and if for some reason we got a technical problem with the live stream, we'll record it and post it later so that you can worship every week. I know, I know, I know some of you are busier than you have ever been before. I mean, you got kids, you got work, you got all, I know some of you are so busy right now. It's just crazy, but we still need to carve out time to be with Jesus and to pray and to be in scripture and to get his thoughts and hope and healing into us.

Also, we can worship all throughout the day. You're in that Zoom meeting or your homeschooling or whatever it is or you're bored at home and you can't see your friends or you're trying to do class online. You can stop in the middle of that and just go, God, I know you're here. Help me to see you. When we do that, that's worship because worship is whenever we turn our attention to God, so worship.

One last thing in terms of fighting the negative voices. I mean, it really helps to keep our sense of humor, man. I mean, find humor wherever you can find. It is one of God's greatest gifts. I saw a post this week that I thought was kind of funny. Kansas, social distancing for 158 years. Being from Eastern Washington, that one resonated with me. Find humor wherever you can because when we surrender our plans an hour by hour, ask God to lead us. When we really believe that with Jesus what looks like a dead end, may be the start of something very big and when we silence the fiend that lies like truth, we experience hope, courage, power and healing and that's what you see at the end of this story.

Paul and Silas, they heal this slave girl and because of that they end up being thrown in prison for talking about Jesus, but in prison they respond in a surprising way. It says about midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God in jail, singing hymns to God and then there's an earthquake and their chains fall off because Bell Press, when we worship, prison doors fly open. That's what worship does. When you can sing, when you have just been beaten, then you are free even though you're in jail.

March 29, 2020

When you can sing, when the Dow Jones plunges, then you are free. When you can sing in the middle of a pandemic, then you are free. When you can sing during a shelter in place order because Jesus is the place you shelter, then you are free because your joy, your hope isn't in your job or your bank account or your health even. Jesus is the shelter. Jesus is the place where I shelter and because of that we have hope and courage that is not dependent on our circumstances.

I had been working very hard at this, this whole thing. I have had times, like a lot of us I think, I've had times of fear. How's this going to affect my family? How's this going to affect? How's this going to affect the church? How long is it going to last? I've had times of fear, but there have also been times in prayer where I have felt God's presence and when I feel his presence, it brings me hope and it brings me courage and it brings me healing. When I say pray, I mean pray, pray, right? Like spend some time. I read the Bible to get God's thoughts in my head. I picture Jesus sitting next to me because he is, and you need to know just because I'm a pastor, it's not like my prayer life is perfect. My mind always wanders during prayer. I have spiritual ADD. My mind is constantly wandering. I just let it.

I just kind of aim all my wandering thoughts at Jesus, just this steady stream of consciousness. Jesus, I'm worried about that helped me decide about this. Oh, I need to go pick up that thing at the grocery store. Huh? Just remembered Rick Moore from eighth grade. Ooh, a squirrel. Right? Like that's my prayer life, right, and maybe that's your prayer life. I just kind of aim it to Jesus, and every once in a while I say, Jesus, are you getting all this? And then sometimes nothing happens. I don't hear anything, don't feel anything. But then other times, he speaks in a thought that is clearly not my thought. A memory, a song, a verse of scripture that just pops into my head. Maybe it's something someone says later in the day and I'm like, that's the answer to my prayer. When I feel his presence, I still have all the same problems that I had, but I have more courage and I have more hope for about an hour, and then I need to do it all over again.

Lord, I need thee every hour I need thee. Not only do I find courage for myself, but it equips me to be able to give that courage and healing away to others, and that's how this story in Acts ends. Paul and Silas, they'd worship their chains come off, but before they leave the jail, they convert the jailer to be a follower of Jesus. Because see, the jailer saw the hope, the uncrushable hope, that they had and he wanted that. Paul and Silas were able to lead the jailer to Christ because when we surrender to Jesus, minute by minute, just like Paul does in this text, then he brings hope and healing to us and to others.

As I shared with you before this fall, I went to Greece with some folks from our church to do some ministry with Muslim refugees, many of them who are becoming Christian. We were also supposed to go to Beirut on that exact same trip, but there were riots in Beirut that had shut down the roads in and out of the airport. Literally, like an hour or a couple of hours before we were supposed to go to Beirut, we had to change all of our plans and that threw the entire weeks schedule completely off. Everything, all the plans got messed up because of that, but because of that, we had an adventure every day by saying, okay, what was on the calendar is not there anymore. God, what do you want us to be doing today? Because of that, we had these amazing, great experiences we never would have had if we'd been able to do our original plans.

Over the last couple of months, I've told you some stories from that trip. All of those stories that I have told you would not have happened had we been able to do our original plan. Well, one night after dinner, most of the team took a taxi back to the airport, but a few of us just kind of on a whim decided to walk.

March 29, 2020

As we were walking, we saw a building that looked like a refugee center. We went in and we met a man, I'll call him [inaudible 00:20:57]. [inaudible 00:20:59] had been a very wealthy man in Iran, but he had fled to Greece to find more freedom. When he got to Greece, he was in a bar waiting for a lawyer who was supposed to help him, but the lawyer never came. He called the lawyer on the phone and a woman in the bar next to him, heard him speaking Farsi and she spoke Farsi, so she started a conversation with him and in that conversation, invited he to go to church with her the next day.

[inaudible 00:21:25] went to church and there was loud music and guitars and drums. He said, you can't worship God this way. This is blasphemous, right? It's not his experience at all, and then she gave him a Bible and he went home and flung it on the floor and kind of forgot about it. Well, a little while later, his wife back in Iran, divorced him and took every penny that he had. Now, he was stuck in Greece. He had no money. He was about to become homeless, right? He called up this woman who had invited him to church and said, okay, I need to know now, which is right, Christianity or Islam? She said, don't ask me. Ask God. He hung up and started praying a simple prayer to Jesus.

As he was praying, he fell asleep, happens to the best of us, right, and then he had a dream. In the dream, he saw a mountain and on the top of the mountain was a sign that said, Matthew 6:13. He didn't really know what that was. He'd never read the Bible before, but he woke up, figured it had something to do with the Bible, found the Bible that she had given him and when he opened it, it just kind of on its own opened to Matthew 6:13 on its own, and that's what he'd seen in the dream.

He got super excited. He felt like that was God talking to him. He called the woman who would invite him to church and said, God just talked to me. God just talked to me. She said, well, of course he did. Do you know what time this is? Hang up. So I can go back to sleep. Not exactly our idea of a perfect evangelist, but God worked through her any way. He prayed, Jesus, I'm a good man. Why are all these bad things happening to me? Why am I poor? Why did my wife leave me? Why am I about to become homeless? He got a thought and he knew it wasn't his, and the thoughts said, I was a good man too and on earth I did everything right and look what happened to me. I got crucified. In that moment, he felt God's presence in a way that he's never felt God's presence before. He gave his life to Christ and felt courage and hope that he never had before.

Few days later, he called his sister to tell her he'd become a Christian and she said, never call me again because even your phone call will make my phone unclean and makes me unclean if I answered because you became a Christian, never call again. But then she said, however, I do have a problem in my life and if your Jesus is real, he knows what that problem is, so you ask him to help me with that. Two months later, his sister called him back and said, Jesus is my savior and my Lord. She never told him what the problem was, but somehow Jesus had met her in that, that had led her to make Jesus the leader of her life and forgive her of her sins.

Well, all of that made [inaudible 00:23:56] change his plans. His plan was to go to England because the economy was better there, but he decided after all of this to stay in Greece to help refugees find food and housing and to find hope in Jesus. He says, Jesus died for me, so I certainly can live for him. [inaudible 00:24:13] is an example of someone even before he knew it was following the nudges of the Holy Spirit and being guided by the Holy Spirit. All of his plans, every plan he had got blocked, but in all the twists and turns and a chance meeting of an imperfect evangelist in a bar, Jesus guided him to something bigger and to something better. What looked like a dead end, poverty, homelessness became

a new beginning because of Jesus. In spite of the hardship he still has, he's still poor. He still faces all kinds of problems. He has joy. He has hope. He has peace. He has courage.

Remember, the only reason we got to meet him was because we could not go to Beirut the way we had planned and because some of us on a whim decided to walk rather than take a taxi. Although, in retrospect it probably wasn't a whim. It was probably God guiding us to him because not only did we get to hear his story and be encouraged by his story, we got to encourage him. We were also able to help him financially a little bit so that he could continue his ministry to refugees because God was guiding us through all of that to something better than we had planned for ourselves.

See, sometimes the best thing that can happen to us is when all our plans get wrecked. Sometimes the very best thing that can happen to us is when all of our plans get wrecked. In this time of anxiety and fear, stick close to Jesus. Let him fill you up. You can't give what you don't have, so don't be so busy helping everyone else that you're not getting help yourself. Spend time with Jesus. Let him fill you up. Follow his nudges moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day, and watch how he moves through you and brings you hope and courage, but also brings that to the other people around you.

It looks like we are in for some difficult weeks and months ahead. I mean, the road ahead looks like it's got some really hard stuff, but Bell Press, remember who you are and remember whose you are. You are sons and daughters of the most high King and he will never leave you or forsake you. He is at work in this to bring about his good purposes and we can count on him to do that. When we turn to him minute by minute, hour by hour, he gives us a love so deep that it can't be fathomed, life so strong it'll never die, peace that will never be taken away, joy that will not be diminished and hope that will never disappoint. He will turn this tragedy into triumph, this sorrow into singing and he will, he will through his almighty power turn this pandemic into praise.

Bell Press, the Lord your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He is mighty to save. Jesus, thank you for that. God, we bring you our fears and our anxieties, our questions. Lord, all the things racing in our minds. How long will this last? What's going to be the result? God, we give them to you. You are the one we are focused on Jesus. You are the one we are hanging on to because only you are a sure anchor in every storm. Help us to do that, Lord. We can't do it on our own. Help us by the power of your Holy Spirit to keep our minds focused on you and Lord, follow your nudges minute by minute, day by day to the bigger thing you have in store for us. We ask this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

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**Discussion Questions:** Read Acts 16:6-34

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1. In verses 6-10 where it says Paul was blocked by the Holy Spirit from going to Bithynia or the province of Asia, how do you think the Holy Spirit "spoke" to Paul? An inner voice? Circumstances? Closed doors/open doors? All of the above? Other?
2. Why do you think Lydia responded to Paul's message about Jesus?
3. Why do you think Paul and Silas sang even while in prison?
4. Why do you think the jailer responded to the message of Jesus?



March 29, 2020

5. What does this passage tell you about how God guides us daily, even in difficult times like COVID-19?