

# **The Spirit's Leading**

Acts 16:6-15

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There's an oft-repeated saying, that says, "God works in mysterious ways." Many people believe these words are in the Bible, but they're not. There are certainly passages that talk about God's ways being higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9) or beyond our ability to understand (Romans 11:33), but these specific words are not in the Bible. They are actually found in a hymn, written by William Cowper, called, God works in a mysterious way. Regardless of its origin, the phrase persists in the vocabulary of many Christians because we have found it to be generally true. While we believe that God is in control and that He leads us, we do not always understand the how or the why of that process. As such, God's ways often do remain mysterious to us.

Our passage this morning puts that fact on clear display. Paul and his new companions began their second missionary journey, but continually found their way blocked. Each new plan they made seemed to be stopped by God in some way. But rather than becoming discouraged, they saw it as the Lord guiding them in the direction He would have them go. And as we reach the conclusion of our passage today, we'll discover that God was indeed leading them all the way, and He had a plan they could not have anticipated.

God does often lead us, but not always in the clear, readily understandable ways we might like. Nonetheless, when we have the appropriate response, trusting Him rather than becoming frustrated that He doesn't seem to be going along with our plans, we will discover not only peace, but a deeper trust in Him as we see His plans work out in ways we never could have anticipated.

## **Negative Guidance**

When we left off last week in Acts 16, Paul had departed on his second missionary journey. He and Barnabas had separated over the question of whether they should bring John Mark with them or not. Barnabas and John Mark headed to Cyprus, so Paul decided to embark on his journey with Silas. They initially headed north, then headed back east, to the towns Paul and Barnabas had visited on their first journey. In Lystra, Paul decided to bring a young man, Timothy under his wing. Timothy began traveling with Paul and Silas, traveling with them on their journey. As we continue in Acts 16, we see what the next stage of their journey looked like.

<sup>6</sup> Next Paul and Silas traveled through the area of Phrygia and Galatia, because the Holy Spirit had prevented them from preaching the word in the province of Asia at that time. <sup>7</sup> Then coming to the borders of Mysia, they headed north for the province of Bithynia, but again the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go there. <sup>8</sup> So instead, they went on through Mysia to the seaport of Troas. (Acts 16:6-8, NLT)

This passage is full of a bunch of names of places that mean nothing to us. One of the keys here is to understand that several of these places are not cities, but rather regions or provinces (think of them like counties or states). The first place they traveled was through the regions of Phrygia and Galatia. Some of this would have included the towns Paul had previously visited, but there were likely many other towns they visited there.

Unfortunately, Luke does not give us much detail about what they did in these places, though we can assume they continued to spread the gospel message and encourage and instruct the Christians they encountered. Luke doesn't tell us these things because that was not his emphasis. His emphasis was to show us that while these regions were places the missionary team traveled through, they were not the team's ultimate goal.

It seems Paul had some strategic plan in mind and intended to preach in the province of Asia. This is confusing to us, because when we think of Asia, we think of a massive continent. When we think of the fact that Paul and his companions were in the middle east, we become confused by the statement that Paul couldn't preach in Asia, as (depending on how you define it), it seems like either he had already done so, or he was heading the wrong direction to get to Asia!

Our confusion is to be understood. The *province* of Asia is not the same thing as the *continent* of Asia. Today, we do not think of the province of Asia, certainly not in the way Paul and his companions would have. The province of Asia was a region at the southwestern edge of modern-day Turkey. The province of Asia contained the city of Ephesus, where we know Paul eventually traveled. It's possible he was hoping to travel there on this journey, but the Lord kept preventing him from doing so.

So, Paul, Silas, and Timothy traveled along the edge of that region, and eventually made the decision to head north, to the province of Bithynia. Luke tells us, however, that once again they were prevented from traveling there by the Spirit of Jesus.

All of this raises some questions for us. How were they prevented? Why were they prevented? How do we know when the Lord is leading us in a different direction? I believe this passage speaks to these questions.

Luke does not tell us exactly what prevented them from being able to preach in these regions, but he does say that they recognized this as God leading them and that He personally was preventing them from doing these things. It is possible that God performed some grand sign before them. Maybe He created a huge wall of fire between them and the region they wanted to go to. That would have been a clear depiction of His guidance. But I'm inclined to think it wasn't something quite so miraculous. I suspect there was something far more mundane that kept them from going to Asia right now. More than likely, God allowed circumstances to happen that prevented them from going. Maybe they couldn't find lodging. Maybe they'd gotten sick and couldn't travel. Maybe there was some sort of unrest that let them know they shouldn't be going right now. Or maybe, as they began walking that way, they all began to get a strong feeling that they were walking in disobedience to the Lord.

We ultimately don't know, but we do know they recognized that the doors for them to go to Asia and Bithynia were being closed by God. Their response is incredibly wise. It does not appear that they threw up their hands in despair. It doesn't appear that they became frustrated. They don't seem to have questioned why God wasn't removing the obstacles in their way. Rather, they came to trust that God had a purpose in not allowing them to go. They believed God's way was best and continued to follow His leading.

So, how do we learn to follow the Lord's leading? I've got a couple of suggestions.

**First, learn to recognize the Spirit's prompting.** This sounds kind of mystical, but it's not. The scriptures tell us that the Holy Spirit leads us inwardly. You have probably had times where you felt a really strong urge or prompting to do something (or not do something). We should learn to listen to those promptings (assuming they match what the scriptures teach). As we do, we will learn to recognize the Lord's leading, and we will become better at following Him.

**Second, approach our plans humbly.** We often forget that we do not see things as clearly as we'd like to think. God sees things much more clearly than we do, and often, His priorities are different than ours as well. We often conclude that when things don't work out the way we desire, God has abandoned us and isn't leading us anymore. That's not true. Sometimes God leads us in a different direction than we had planned, but His plans are always better. We must recognize that all of God's leading (even leading by closing doors) is an act of love.

**Third, be open.** The way we learn to follow God's leading is to be willing to change our own plans. If we are humble, we can recognize that our plans are not always right. But we also need to be open to changing course when the Lord leads us. We may recognize that the Lord has closed a door, but we also be willing to go through a different door He has opened. When God leads you by putting a roadblock in your path, look around and see if He's leading you in a different direction. What doors are open? What areas do you feel like He's telling you to try next? Recognize that every step of the process (even the steps of attempting to discern His leading) is designed by God for good. We will not become good at this overnight, but as we practice these steps over and over, we'll become better and better at listening to Him.

Eventually, Paul, Silas, and Timothy discovered that God had been leading them in a different direction all along. They might have missed (or ignored) God's leading if He hadn't first showed them where He didn't want them to go. It was only after those experiences that they were primed (and eager) to go exactly where He had prepared for them to travel next.

## Positive Guidance

We see God leading the missionary team through positive means in verses 9 and 10,

<sup>9</sup> That night Paul had a vision: A man from Macedonia in northern Greece was standing there, pleading with him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" <sup>10</sup> So

we decided to leave for Macedonia at once, having concluded that God was calling us to preach the Good News there. (Acts 16:9-10, NLT)

After consistently finding closed doors in their paths, Paul had a vision. He saw a man in Macedonia (which is in what today is northern Greece) calling them to come over and help them. Paul told his teammates about this vision, and they all concluded that this was where God had been leading them all along. They may not have intended to head across the sea just yet, but God had plans for them to do exactly that.

So, believing they finally knew where the Lord was leading, they immediately made arrangements to travel to Macedonia. Luke tells us what happened next in verses 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> We boarded a boat at Troas and sailed straight across to the island of Samothrace, and the next day we landed at Neapolis. <sup>12</sup> From there we reached Philippi, a major city of that district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. And we stayed there several days. (Acts 16:11-12, NLT)

They needed to take a ship across the Aegean sea to get to the region of Macedonia, so they went and boarded a ship at Troas. One scholar pointed out the phrase “sailed straight across” to the island of Samothrace was actually sailor-speak for we had favorable winds at our back the whole way. This seems to have been true, because they made their crossing in just two days, while later in Acts 20:6, the same trip the opposite direction would take 5 days! Finally, they felt that they were on the right path, and God was blessing what they were doing.

We should note an important change in these verses. It appears that the missionary team grew, because for the first time in the book of Acts, Luke uses the term “we” to describe the group of travelers. In other words, at this point in the journey, Luke was traveling with them. We will see this same phenomenon in a few other places in Acts. We generally assume that when Luke uses the pronoun “we”, he is stating that he was present with them, and when he does not, he was elsewhere.

Some have speculated that the reason Luke joined the team at this point was because some or all of the team had become too ill to make the trips they intended, and this was God’s way of leading them elsewhere. This speculation is based on the fact that Luke was a doctor, and that might explain why he came with them at this point. While it seems like a plausible explanation, the text doesn’t say the reason why, and clearly Luke didn’t think this was an important part of the story, so he didn’t include it.

## **Philippi**

The team made it across the Aegean Sea in record time and then headed into the city of Philippi. Philippi was a significant city in the ancient world. It was unique, because while it was in Greece, it was considered part of Rome. This was because there was a great battle during the second Roman civil war in 42 BC where the forces of Caesar Augustus defeated the forces of Brutus and Cassius (who you might remember as the people who assassinated Julius Caesar). After this battle, Caesar granted the city of

Philippi the status of a Roman colony, which meant for all intents and purposes, they were considered citizens of Rome. This meant they had the right to vote, the right to have their own senate, and they would have spoken Latin, the language of the Roman empire. One of the most significant benefits of Roman citizenship was that citizens were exempt from paying Roman taxes! (how different from today)

The city of Philippi was a very Roman city, even though it was in a completely different country. It always contained a large contingent of Roman soldiers, and many former government officers chose to retire to the city. The population of the city was probably between 10-15,000, so while it was not a booming metropolis, it was still a significant city in the region. Luke records their encounter in Philippi in verses 13-15,

<sup>13</sup> On the Sabbath we went a little way outside the city to a riverbank, where we thought people would be meeting for prayer, and we sat down to speak with some women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup> One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a merchant of expensive purple cloth, who worshiped God. As she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying. <sup>15</sup> She and her household were baptized, and she asked us to be her guests. "If you agree that I am a true believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my home." And she urged us until we agreed. (Acts 16:13-15, NLT)

Apparently, given how Roman the city was, there was very little Jewish influence. On the Sabbath, Paul and his companions wanted to gather with other Jews to worship the Lord, and to hopefully teach them about Christ. Luke says they went outside the city to a riverbank, where they thought there would be a meeting for prayer. Normally, they would have gone to the synagogue on the Sabbath, but there was apparently no synagogue in Philippi. You needed ten Jewish men to form a synagogue, so it seems the city did not have even that. Jewish tradition said that if you didn't have a synagogue, you should go to meet outside near a river or lake for prayer.

Philippi had a prohibition against outside religions being brought in, so Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke went outside the walls of the city to find a river. Sure enough, they discovered a small group of God-fearing women gathered there to pray. They joined them and shared the gospel message with them. One, named Lydia, embraced the message and believed. She and her whole household were baptized (which we assume also indicates they had believed as well). The first convert in Europe was a woman!

Lydia appears to have been fairly wealthy. We know she dealt in purple cloth, which was a luxury item, often worn by royalty. She was from Thyatira, which is still known today for its fine dying of textiles. The fact that she had plenty of space to accommodate these four men at her home without it being a hardship, and the statement that her whole household was baptized gives us the sense that she was a woman of quite some means. And now, she was a believer. She invited the men to stay at her house for some time. We can surely assume she wanted to learn more about Jesus and how she should follow Him.

## Conclusion

So, in the end, Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke ended up exactly where God wanted them to be. They had started their journey with one plan in mind, but discovered God had a completely different plan for them instead. Rather than despairing, however, they trusted Him, ultimately seeing God move in ways they could not have anticipated. So let's consider what lessons we can learn from this passage.

**First, don't let setbacks discourage you.** When things don't work out the way we hope, many Christians get discouraged. We believe it's because we're a failure, or God is no longer using us, has forgotten about us, or even is punishing us! We must recognize God has a purpose in everything we face. My favorite verse is Romans 8:28, And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. (Romans 8:28, NLT)

I like to underline the word *everything*, because it's a reminder that God is working in every circumstance to accomplish His good purposes. Rather than becoming discouraged when things don't go as we plan, come back to God and look for direction. He may be using failure to teach you or guide you down a different path.

**Second, be ready for the opportunities God puts before you.** Some of the most rewarding opportunities for ministry come in surprising ways. Sometimes someone comes across your path and you can sense they are open and you have an opportunity to minister to them. Seize those opportunities! Or maybe you are given the chance to serve in a way you hadn't anticipated—recognize the Lord may be opening a door you weren't expecting and walk through it! When we are open to what God may have us do, we'll be far more likely to experience the blessings He intends for us.

**Finally, learn to be led by the Spirit of God...He knows better!** I think one of the reasons we struggle with being led by God is because we don't really want to follow! We want Him to follow *us* and bless *our* plans! We'll do better if we submit our plans to His.

I think of it like someone running from second to third in baseball. That runner is supposed to focus on one thing, and one thing only: the third-base coach. If he looks around and tries to decide what to do for himself, he's likely to get in trouble. But if he trusts the coach to guide him well, he stands a much better chance at being successful. So here's the question, do we trust God enough to listen to Him? Do we trust that He sees more of the field than we can? Are we willing to change course or even stop when He tells us? This is the kind of obedience we should strive for. We must listen for the Lord's leading and focus on Him alone. His way's better!

Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke learned these lessons first-hand. Things didn't go the way they planned, but they did go as God planned. It seems that these men were ok with that, because they trusted God knew what's best. I think we'd all be a lot better off if we learned to take the same approach.

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