

The Book of Acts: The Spirit Moving

Obeying The Voice of The Lord / Acts 16:6-15 / February 8, 2026

Introduction:

How well can you hear the voice of the Lord in your life? God's Word can certainly be the voice of God in our lives. That's why we call it God's Word, because it's as if He is speaking to us through the pages of Scripture. This is a huge blessing for our benefit, and the reason we say "thanks be to God" whenever we hear it. Thanks be to God who loves us enough to have spoken to us! But what about other ways that we can hear the voice of the Lord? Can you hear the voice of the Holy Spirit clearly? Scripture tells us that everyone who is truly saved has the Spirit of God indwelling within them, and the New Testament gives this spirit the term "paraclete," which means "Advocate," "Helper," "Comforter," or "Counselor".

Meaning that part of what the Holy Spirit does is advise us on what God wants us to do. So, can you hear His voice when He tells you to do something? When the Lord asks you to do something, how good are you at obeying His voice? Most of us are comfortable with God's guidance, whether through His Word or through His Spirit, when it feels like green lights and open doors. That's especially true when our plans and God's plans align. We pray, our circumstances work out in our favor, and we say, "See? The Lord is leading." In those moments, He's easy to trust and easy to follow. I find that we struggle to hear Him and obey Him when His guidance feels like resistance; when our plans stall, opportunities evaporate, or paths we were once confident about suddenly become dead ends. If you've walked with Christ for any length of time, you already know this tension. You step out in faith, you try to be obedient, you pursue something you believe is good and even God-honoring, and then it just doesn't work. Doors close, progress stops, and the silence stretches longer than you'd like it to. That tension is where today's passage in Acts meets us. This passage isn't about dramatic miracles or large-scale conversions. Instead, it's about guidance, obedience, and a God who knows exactly where the gospel needs to go, even when His servants don't. It's a reminder that God doesn't always lead by explanation. Sometimes, He leads by interruption, and those interruptions are the guidance. By the time we arrive in Acts 16, Paul is on his 2nd missionary. He has already endured persecution, planted churches, confronted false teachers, and traveled hundreds of miles for the sake of Christ. Paul, along with Silas and Timothy, is a seasoned group of missionaries. They aren't reckless or lazy and are actively pursuing ministry opportunities. That fact matters because what happens next is not God correcting disobedience, it's God redirecting obedience. Sometimes we assume that closed doors mean we've done something wrong, and that's simply not the case here. Faithful people can still experience firm divine "no's."

Acts 16:6-8

The Macedonian Call

⁶ And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷ And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. ⁸ So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.

Luke tells us that Paul and his companions traveled through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, "having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia." The Asia that the author is referring to isn't the continent; it was the name of a Roman Province south of the Black Sea and east of Greece. This region wasn't pagan in some unique way, nor was it hostile territory. In fact, Asia would later become home to significant churches in Ephesus, Colossae, and Laodicea. The gospel absolutely belonged there, just not yet. The Holy Spirit doesn't say Asia is wrong, He says Asia is not now. So Paul pivots direction and they attempt to go north into Bithynia. Once again, Luke says, "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them." Two routes now blocked with no explanation given. And notice how Luke describes it. First, he says the Holy Spirit forbids them, then he says its the Spirit of Jesus not allowing them. Luke is making it clear to us with increasingly heightened language that the risen Christ Himself is actively governing the

direction of His mission. Here's the first truth we need to sit with: participating in God's divine will is not just about doing the right thing, but also doing the right thing at the right time. Paul wanted to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. That was right. But Jesus wanted him somewhere else. There is a kind of obedience to the Lord that listens not only for commands but is also receptive to restraints. What Paul does next is important to note, as well. He doesn't quit but he also doesn't try to force a door open to ministry. He also doesn't accuse God of being unclear about things. He simply keeps moving forward with humility and attentiveness and does what he thinks is the next right thing. Their movement toward a coastal city like Troas is completely practical and logical, knowing that port cities are places of trade and commerce, laden with roads by which the gospel can spread more easily. From a human standpoint, it looks like a wise and well-thought-out plan for ministry. But, as we know, the heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps. So they pass by Mysia and go down to Troas. At this point, they are quite literally at the edge of the map, and all that's left is the sea. They've followed God as best they know how and obeyed what's clear. And now they're standing at the shoreline, waiting for Him to give some sign of where to go next. Then, finally, God speaks.

Acts 16:9-10

⁹ And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Notice that in Paul's vision, God doesn't lay out a detailed mission strategy for them to follow, instead he shows him a simple plea for help. And Paul responds immediately. Luke says they concluded that God had called them to preach the gospel to them, and they set out at once. As an aside, something very small and exciting happens here. Notice the inclusion of the personal plural "we". This should alert us to the fact that the author himself was present during this moment. What we are reading right now is from a firsthand witness! Luke is present and relaying to us things that happened before his very eyes! OK, now back on topic... Notice something subtle but important: Paul doesn't treat the vision as a private spiritual experience that God gives him. Obviously, on waking up, he clearly had a strong feeling that what he had seen was much more than just a dream. And so, the apostle submits what he saw to communal discernment; "we concluded." The guidance he is given is tested and confirmed within the body of missionaries. And now, after closed doors, blocked routes, and patient obedience, the next step becomes clear to them. If we can learn something from this account, it teaches us that God often reveals the direction He wants us to go in a progressive way, not necessarily all at once. In other words, if you are going through a time of uncertainty about the future and you're wondering what God wants you to do next, it's very likely that He may give you just enough light for the next step on the path, not for the entire journey. Maybe that uncertainty comes from a personal ministry that you have with someone who you know needs Jesus, but you don't know how to continue ministering to them because of closed doors. Maybe the uncertainty comes from a relationship that needs to be mended, but even though you've done the right thing over and over, it still doesn't feel like it's improving. Or maybe your church is going through a rough patch with finances, and they've taken every practical, logical step, but for some reason it's not getting better. What we don't want to do is think that God is punishing us somehow... Do you view closed doors as failure, or, like Paul, do you view closed doors as God's sovereign guidance over your life? Do you find yourself getting upset and complaining when you don't get your way, or do you view His "no's" as Him preparing something better for you to walk in? Sometimes the best thing we can do is simply wait for the voice of the Holy Spirit to tell us what to do next. And you know what? It may not be what you think is the most practical or wise by human standards! And that's ok! His thoughts are not our thoughts, and His ways are not our ways! In the meantime, keep doing the next right thing and don't give up, but be open what the Lord may desire, even if it isn't what you would desire.

“We cannot expect the regular guidance of visions and prophecies in our everyday decision making, but we are encouraged by Luke’s narrative to believe in God’s sovereign overruling and intervention to direct the progress of his word and his people, where necessary. Meanwhile, the norm that is suggested by Acts is the taking of initiatives for the gospel, with wise planning and a loving concern for those we seek to reach, trusting God to open or close the way as he sees best.”
-David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*

Let’s continue:

Acts 16:11-12

The Conversion of Lydia

¹¹ So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days.

They sail from the port city of Troas to the island of Samothrace in the Aegean Sea, then on to Neapolis on the mainland of Macedonia. This trip by boat of 156 miles is traversed in a mere two days! In a sense, God is confirming with these men that they are headed in the right direction by literally putting the wind in their sails. Later on in Acts, this same trip takes them 5 days to accomplish. Luke doesn’t take note of any evangelistic efforts in these cities and hurries the story of their journey along until they finally reach Philippi, a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. By “leading city,” Luke doesn’t mean this was the capital of Macedonia, but simply that this place was large and influential. Ancient Philippi was certainly impressive politically and quite prosperous, but underwhelming spiritually. There is no synagogue here, and that detail matters. It suggests a minimal Jewish population and little organized religious life. Remember, Paul’s regular pattern for evangelism was to go first to the synagogue to preach. From a human perspective, Philippi doesn’t look strategic, but God is not building His kingdom by human standards. God’s mission advances according to His own mercy, not our human metrics of what we think success looks like.

Acts 16:13

¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together.

In Jewish texts, it's stated that in order to establish a new synagogue, there must be ten heads of Jewish households present. If these requirements couldn't be met, they were to meet on the Sabbath under the open sky and near a river or the sea. Therefore, where the missionary quartet goes is functionally a synagogue in the form of a small prayer meeting by the river. It may not seem like much to us, but God has always delighted in small beginnings.

Acts 16:14

¹⁴ One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.

As a seller of purple goods from Thyatira, Lydia is likely wealthy, influential, and respected. But Luke also tells us she was a worshiper of God, meaning she was a Gentile who was sincerely seeking after the one true God. But sincerity does not equal salvation. Then Luke writes one of the most important lines in the entire book of Acts: “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.” Paul preached, Lydia listened, but the Lord opened her heart. It’s a reminder that salvation, whether preached or received, is not based on human achievement; it is divine initiative. Remembering that protects us

from pride and from despair. When it comes to successful ministry, you cannot argue someone into the kingdom, and you cannot manipulate conversion. You are not responsible to change hearts; that is the Holy Spirit's job. Your job is only to faithfully speak the message of the gospel. While Luke doesn't record Paul's exact words, we know what Paul always preached: Christ crucified and risen. Lydia would have heard that salvation is not found in moral effort or religious devotion, but in Jesus Christ, who lived perfectly, died sacrificially, and rose victoriously. Christianity is not advice; it is an announcement that God saves sinners by His grace alone, through trusting in the forgiveness provided by the finished work of His Son. When God opens a heart like that, and the Holy Spirit softens what was once stone, new life is breathed into that person.

Acts 16:15

¹⁵ And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

Lydia's new faith immediately expressed itself through obedience and hospitality. She opens up her home and her resources to Paul and the others. Thus, the first church in Europe began to meet in her living room. God uses a businesswoman, a prayer meeting, and closed doors to change a continent. This church in Philippi would go on to be one of the most beloved churches that the Apostle Paul established. If you've read his letter to the Philippians, you would see how much he adores and appreciates them as partners in the work of the gospel. While we may have our own plans of what we think ministry should look like, it is always God who guides His mission and His people, with perfect wisdom. God is always ahead of us. He knows where the gospel must go next, who is ready to hear it, and which paths must close to get us there. Closed doors are not evidence of God's absence. They are often proof of His involvement. A lesson learned well by Paul over the course of his lifetime. I wonder if he was thinking of the closed doors that led to the establishment of the church in Philippi as he wrote to them from the darkness of a Roman jail cell.

Philippians 1:12-14

The Advance of the Gospel

¹² I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. ¹⁴ And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

So what can we take away from today's passage? First, trust God's "no" as much as His "yes." God's refusals are as purposeful as His permissions, and He uses both to further His Kingdom. Whether yes or no, listen to His voice and obey, even when it's not what you want to hear. Second, successful ministry is measured in faithfulness, not visibility to the world. God often does His deepest and most impactful work quietly and through people who are willing to listen to His voice and obey, because that's what it means to be faithful. Lastly, pray for open hearts, not just open doors. The greatest miracle in Acts 16 is not guidance in a dream, but salvation on the side of a river. The same Lord who opened Lydia's heart to the gospel is still opening hearts today for people of every tribe, nation, and tongue to repent of their sins and trust in the forgiveness of Jesus. Maybe you've come today thinking yourself to be religious, but unable to hear the Holy Spirit's leading in your life. Or maybe you've come today searching for something more, and you don't know Christ as your Savior and Lord. Wherever you may be in your walk, you came here today because something inside you told you to do so... Listen to His voice and obey, because salvation comes through Jesus Christ alone, and He is inviting you to trust Him, maybe for the first time or the thousandth time. Listen to His voice and obey.