

## Guided by the Spirit (Acts 16:1-12)<sup>a</sup>

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### Context

1. **Paul and Barnabas disagree about whether to take John Mark on what will become Paul's second missionary journey**
2. **Barnabas and John Mark depart for Cyprus**
3. **Paul and Silas travel through Syria and Cilicia on their way back toward Derbe and Lystra, where they ministered on the first journey**
  - A. We notice Paul's courage: Lystra was where Paul had previously been stoned and left for dead!

### Passage (Acts 16:1-12)

[1] Then he came to Derbe and Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, [the] son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father [was] Greek. [2] He was well spoken of by the brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium. [3] Paul wanted to have him go on with him. And he took [him] and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek. [4] And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. [5] So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily. [6] Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. [7] After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. [8] So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. [9] And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." [10] Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them. [11] Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and the next [day] came to Neapolis, [12] and from there to Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony. And we were staying in that city for some days.<sup>1</sup>

### Circumcision of Timothy

1. **Timothy's character**
  - A. Raised with knowledge of Jewish scriptures
    - I. Grandmother and mother trained him, as a young Jew, to hope for the Messiah of Israel (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15).

## B. A good testimony among the brethren

### I. Already being recognized by those with the prophetic gift

- a. *This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare (1 Timothy 1:18.)*
- b. *Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership (1 Timothy 4:14).*

## C. It seems Paul must have considered Timothy as a possible substitute for John Mark on the missionary journey<sup>4</sup>

- I. Eventually came to be like a son, serving with Paul in many places and settings, also experiencing imprisonment (Heb. 13:23)

### II. Paul's subsequent evaluation of his character

- a. *But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged when I know your state. For I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus. But you know his proven character, that as a son with his father he served with me in the gospel (Philippians 2:19–22) .*

## 2. **NOTE: Timothy came to faith out of some of the hardest seed Paul ever planted, in Lystra, where he was subsequently stoned and left for dead**

## 3. **Circumcised, yet the decrees from the Jerusalem council made circumcision unnecessary for salvation?!**

## 4. **Timothy's circumcision was not for salvation, but to minimize offence to those Paul wanted to reach on the upcoming trip**

- A. "If Timothy had not been circumcised, the Jews could have assumed he had renounced his Jewish heritage and had chosen to live as a Gentile."<sup>5</sup>
- B. Probably would not have had full access to the Synagogues in the towns where they would be ministering
- C. Paul's stance on the validity of circumcision *varied with circumstance: Yet not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised (Galatians 2:3).*
- D. Why? *For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law (1 Corinthians 9:19–20).*

## Forbidden by the Spirit

### 1. Twice redirected

A. *Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia (Acts 16:6).*

I. The Roman province of Asia, southwestern portion of modern Turkey containing cities such as Ephesus, Smyrna, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Colosse, Sardis, Pergamos, and Thyatira.

B. *After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit [of Jesus, NU text] did not permit them (Acts 16:7).*

I. Mysia is a region in what is now NW Turkey, bordering the Sea of Marmara and the Dardanelles

II. Bithynia was north of Mysia, along the southern shore of the Black Sea

### 2. Why were they prevented?

A. Didn't those areas need the gospel?

B. Redirected Paul to cross into Greece—a higher priority which would spread the gospel to Rome and, eventually Europe

I. "This was one of Paul's most strategic decisions because it resulted in the spread of the church westward to the continent of Europe."<sup>6</sup>

II. Not *Paul's* decision, but *God's*!

III. God evidently wanted to get the gospel to France, Germany, Switzerland, and England in time for the Protestant Reformation :-)

a. And . . . so my grandmother could be saved and pray for me upon leaving Liverpool for the New World!

C. Bithynia and Ephesus will hear the gospel at a later time (Acts 18:19–21, 24–19:41; 1 Peter 1:1).

D. The cities in the Roman province of Asia would eventually receive the gospel, including seven letters dictated directly by Jesus (Rev. 2; 3)

### 3. Tried to go . . . but the Spirit did not permit them

A. Luke does not explain *how* they were prevented

B. Some things to notice

- I. They were going about God's business doing evangelistic missionary work—doing the work of the Great Commission (Mat. [28:19-20](#))
  - II. God was able to get their attention and redirect their efforts, however He brought that about
  - III. They had no idea, in advance, that this would happen
  - IV. However the Spirit intervened, it was evident to Paul and his companions they were not to go
  - V. Conclusion: God knows how to get our attention when He wants to!
- C. After preventing their progress twice, it would seem that Paul and his companions probably had a season of waiting on God—although Luke doesn't say

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## The Mystery of God's Leading - some observations concerning walking out God's will in our lives

### 1. Overview

- A. NOT a simple topic — something all Christians struggle with in our walk throughout this life
- B. Two common extremes which frequently undermine our Christian effectiveness and witness
- C. Bowling analogy - center lane, gutter on each side, goal is to keep the ball in the middle for the journey
- D. The theme verse
  - I. *The secret [things belong] to the LORD our God, but those [things which are] revealed [belong] to us and to our children forever, that [we] may do all the words of this law* (Deu. [29:29](#)).
    - a. Two categories of information: secret things, revealed things
      - i. Secret things - belong to God
        - The secret things are . . . secret!
          - They cannot be known by us—any attempt to get at them amounts to the sin of divination
          - God is not beholden to reveal the secret things to us
          - By pressing into them, we will wind up in deception<sup>7</sup>
      - ii. Revealed things - belong to us and our descendents
        - Revealed things are those things which God has told us: THE SCRIPTURES

- We are responsible for knowing them *and* passing them on to our children

b. The context:

- i. Deuteronomy: the “second law” (or, Moses reminds them yet again!)
- ii. Disobedience: the failure to please God, to walk in His will

II. The twofold problem: 1) attempting to push into the secret things, 2) failure to pay attention to the revealed things

E. Two gutters to avoid

- I. “Will Whisperer” - the Christian who believes they can discern God’s secret will for their life moment-by-moment
- II. “Goal Getter” - the Christian walking in their own agenda while attributing it to God, often while paying little attention to the revealed things

## 2. The “Will Whisperer” Christian

A. Like a “whisperer” in seeking a mystical, special line of direct communication with God

B. Unwilling to take any action unless and until God specifically provides direction

C. May appear “ultra-spiritual” because of a seeming complete dependence on God

- I. What could be more spiritual than waiting on God moment-by-moment to direct every minor thing we do?

D. Open to deception

I. How and when is God speaking, in what forms?

II. Forcing an God to “speak” by various means . . . when He hasn't.

III. Interpreting all sorts of happenstance as communication from God — happenstance does not set a consistent course!

IV. Pride: *I hear from God directly*

E. Costly mistakes

I. Making huge decisions on sanctified hunches

II. Young family, sells house, relocates to Kansas City (prophets) only to be ignored upon arrival

F. Poor witness

I. Day-to-day life characterized by a chaos of contradictions and destructive reversals

a. *For God is not [the author] of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints (1Cor. 14:33).*

G. Sin: a form of divination: attempting to press into the secret things, *but they belong to God — not us!*

H. Immature: like a teenager who can't walk by principles, but needs a specific list when the parent's are gone for the weekend

### 3. The “Goal Getter” Christian

A. Focused on ministry goals: accomplishments “for God”

I. Prioritizes “doing for Him” over “knowing Him”

II. Trying to “make Him known” to others when they don't really know Him yet themselves—His will, their gifting, and purpose

B. Confuse risk with faith

I. Walking by faith involves trust: therefore it involves some measure of risk

II. Simply because there is risk one can't conclude that faith is involved

III. Faith is often confused with presumption

IV. Taking risks is not the same as exercising faith because risks can be taken without God's involvement

C. Self-willed: charging “ahead of God,” pressing forward with one's own plan without having consulting God

I. Very busy, active in ministry, possibly high profile — but mostly wood, hay, stubble

II. Like Israel in the wilderness

a. *They soon forgot His works; They did not wait for His counsel, 14 But lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, And tested God in the desert. 15 And He gave them their request, But sent leanness into their soul (Ps. 106:13-15)*

### 4. Signs of a “Will Whisperer” or “Goal Getter”

A. External appearance of deep spirituality, but internally shallow in the things of God

B. Lots of *God talk* on their lips: “God led me . . .” “God showed me . . .”

- C. Sanctifying their own will by attributing their decisions to God's leading
- D. Pride: convinced they have a superior ability to discern God's will for their lives, if not His will for others
- E. Lack of staying power: often revealed—in time—by a personal or public “fall”

## 5. The Balanced Leading of God

### A. Why “balanced?”

- I. Constantly keep in mind both the secret things and the revealed things
- II. Theme verse: *The secret [things belong] to the LORD our God, but those [things which are] revealed [belong] to us and to our children forever, that [we] may do all the words of this law* (Deu. [29:29](#)).
- III. Being mindful there are *secret things*: lots of things, *most things* we can't know—so quit trying, rest in this truth!
- IV. Being mindful of the *revealed things*: we are accountable to know and obey these things, in everything we do.
- V. Walk in the *revealed things*, let God handle the *secret things*, and trust that He will!

### B. Pilot Analogy

- I. In absence of sight, the pilot must “fly by instruments”
- II. That which is revealed to the pilot (the indicators on the instruments) substitute for that which cannot be seen (due to bad weather, fog, etc.)
- III. To be successful, the pilot must have a great deal of confidence in the accuracy of the instruments.
- IV. Illustration

Shortly after crossing into Iraq, Col. Patton's jet was “locked on” to by an Iraqi surface-to-air missile radar. He violently maneuvered his aircraft to break the radar's lock on him. His maneuver successfully broke the lock, but it created a new problem. Those radical movements in the dark threw off the balance in his inner ear (which is what happens when a person gets dizzy), causing him to become disoriented. His mind was telling him his plane was in a climbing right turn, but when he checked his instruments, they indicated he was in a 60 degree dive towards the ground! He was sure he was in a climb instead of a dive, and his mind was screaming at him to lower the nose of his F-15 to halt the climb. While his mind commanded him to correct the plane in one direction, his instruments instructed him to do just the opposite. Because he was flying

in total darkness, he had to decide quickly whether to trust his mind or his instruments. His life depended on making the correct choice. Even though it took everything within him to overcome what his mind was telling him, he decided to trust his instruments. He rolled his wings level and pulled his F-15 upward, which drew seven times the force of gravity, pulling the aircraft out of its dive. It only took a few moments to realize he had made the right decision. If he had lowered the nose of his jet like his mind had been telling him, he would have crashed the plane. Trusting his instruments saved his life!<sup>8</sup>

- V. In our case, God is the one who sees (knows the secret things) which we can't see while we are the pilot who must fly by the instruments (the revealed things, the scriptures)

### C. Decision Making

- I. We are free to make decisions within the parameters God has revealed
- II. Like a responsible teenager, God expects us to walk by applying principles He has established
- III. The principles = the Scriptures
  - a. Objectivity judges subjectivity
  - b. Scripture judges experiences and hunches
- IV. We are only responsible for that which God has revealed
- V. We cannot be responsible for discerning His secret will
- VI. All else that we might construe to be God's leading must be seen as 1) initially tentative; 2) rigorously evaluated according to Biblical principles.
- VII. Where "walking the path of faith" tramples upon His Word—violating Biblical principles—then we must conclude it is a "path of presumption" and God is not in it

### D. Trusting the instruments — living while we cannot see

- I. Will we trust that He *is* leading our life even though we can't discern His secret will?
- II. Will we be faithful to serve in the setting where He has placed us *now*—that we aren't where we are by accident?
- III. Do we truly trust that He is big enough and cares enough to keep us where we are or move us elsewhere on His own initiative when required?



IV. If He *isn't* moving us, then *this* is where our ministry is!

V. Faith is often tested to a much greater degree in the mundane (Moses in the wilderness)!

#### E. Letting God be God

I. We do not require God to direct us in every little itty bitty thing

II. We do not attempt to plumb God's secret will

III. We can trust that, where needed, he WILL intervene — so long as we are open to correction and not self-willed

IV. Paul and Silas were (somehow) blocked

V. Paul (evidently) waited on God to provide a new direction

VI. Our ultimate goal: "God's will—nothing less, nothing more, nothing else."<sup>9</sup>

Sat Dec 9 19:30:40 2017



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#### Endnotes:

1. Acts 16:1-12, NKJV
2. Ref-0038, Acts 16:1-3
3. Ref-0089, Acts 16:1
4. "Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, probably as a helper as Mark had been."<sup>2</sup> "In essence, he became John Mark's replacement."<sup>3</sup>
5. Ref-0089, p. 1662
6. Ref-1411, Acts 16:4-5
7. See Jer. 23:32; 29:8-9.
8. KC, Kent Crockett, *Trust Your Instruments*, <http://kentcrockett.com/cgi-bin/illustrations/index.cgi?topic=Trust>
9. COOPER, Dr. David Cooper, <http://www.biblicalresearch.info>

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#### Sources:

- Acts 16:1-12** Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- Ref-** John Walvoord and Roy. B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: SP Publications, 1983).

**0038**

**Ref-0089** John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997).

**Ref-1411** Michael A. Rydelnik, J. Spencer, *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014).

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**Links Mentioned Above**

a - See [http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts\\_by\\_Tony\\_Garland/53\\_Acts\\_16\\_1-12/index.htm](http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/53_Acts_16_1-12/index.htm).

b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.

c - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.