

Sermon 51, Jesus Rules His Missionaries, Acts 16:6-12

Proposition: The Spirit of Jesus prevented Paul and his team from turning to the right or to the left, instead taking them straight on to the far edge of their original plan (Troas) and then beyond it for the sake of spreading His Kingdom in Macedonia.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, I have always found this passage intriguing and baffling. The burning question in my mind has been, "How did the Spirit signal to Paul which way he was supposed to go?" As I have pointed out to you before, that is a question in which Luke has absolutely no interest. As we will see, the point of this short passage is not *how* God leads, but *that* He leads.

I daresay that if you ask any older saint "Has God led you through your life?" you will get a resounding "Yes!" God leads us. Luke, of course, is telling about the progress of the Kingdom of God so that we can be certain of the truth of what we have been taught. The entire first missionary journey, and the first little bit of this second one, appear to have been Paul and Barnabas' idea. They go the way they think they ought to go. But suddenly, Luke introduces the Spirit of Jesus as the real decision-maker. In other words, Christ's kingdom rules not only human hearts and moral choices, but also mission work. Your plans are in God's hands. Who hears the gospel, and when they hear it, are in God's hands. That is the comforting message of this passage.

I. The Original Plan: Go Revisit Every Church Planted Previously, 15:36

In order to make sense of the bare statements that the Spirit did not allow them to go to certain places, we have to look back and see exactly where Paul, Silas, and Timothy were planning to

go. When we do that, we see that Paul presented the plan like this: “And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are” (Acts 15:36). As we know, the next thing that happened was a blow-up between Paul and Barnabas such that Barnabas did not end up going along with Paul. Rather, Paul went with Silas and Timothy. So in that sense, the plan was redirected from the very beginning. Rather than returning through Cyprus, Paul went straight up to Asia Minor, back to Lystra and Derbe. Barnabas alone went to Cyprus, presumably to visit the churches there.

Anyhow, the original plan was not particularly ambitious. Visiting every church they planted on the first trip was a big goal. But it was one that they knew they could accomplish, particularly because they had made the trip before, knew the way, and had friends at every stop. That is totally different than striking out into uncharted territory.

II. The Plan Redirected by Jesus through His Spirit, 16:6-8

But as we keep reading, we see rather quickly that the plan is not going the way they thought it would. They get to Lystra, which on the first trip had been the stop immediately after Pisidian Antioch.

A. No Pisidian Antioch, v. 6

But Pisidian Antioch is missing from the text in v. 6. Instead, Paul and Silas have to go through Phrygian Galatia, or Galatic Phrygia (it could be either one). The point is that this is a territory they didn’t visit last time. It’s not all that far from Pamphylia and Lycaonia, but all the same, it is not a territory that they got to visit. It is a new place.

B. No Turning Left, Toward Asia, v. 6b

They didn’t plan to go to a new place. They planned to go to the old places. I was not able to determine whether one could call Antioch in Pisidia a town in Asia. Obviously, it was (literally speaking) a town in Pisidia, not Asia. Ephesus was the capital of Asia and one of the largest cities in the East, and perhaps that is where they were trying to go. But the Spirit said “Oh no you don’t.” He stopped them from going to Asia, which would have been a left-hand turn off their route. Instead, they stayed on the route toward Troas.

C. No Turning Right, Toward Bithynia, v. 7

In Mysia, they decided to turn right and head up toward the Black Sea coast in the province of Bithynia. Again, the Spirit prevented them from doing so. This time He is called The Spirit of Jesus, the only time this particular phrase appears in the New Testament (though ‘Spirit of Jesus Christ’ is in Philippians 1:19; isn’t it interesting that the Spirit of Jesus told Paul to go to Philippi, and that Paul refers to Him as the Spirit of Jesus only in the letter to Philippi?) By the way, this is a great title. It refers to God the Holy Spirit particularly in His relation of origin. He is not just the Spirit of God the Father, who proceeds from the Father. That is a glorious truth. The Spirit is God’s Spirit, and that is why we worship Him along with the Father. But He also proceeds from the Son. That’s why He can be called “the Spirit of Jesus.” “Jesus” is our Lord’s human name. He has been God’s Son literally since forever, but He was not named Jesus until Mary gazed at Him in the manger and told Him that His name would be “Yahweh Saves.”

What is Luke telling us? That Jesus is still very much in charge. He ascended into heaven at the beginning of Acts, but He is the one who decides where His people go and how they serve Him. If you want to know how He communicates this, the answer is “by His Spirit.” How do we know that we are hearing from the Holy Spirit? Luke is not interested in this question. We will talk about it a bit more at the end of the sermon, but for now, I want you to see that the Holy Spirit proceeds both from Jesus and from His Father. A message from the Spirit is a message from both. It’s not that the Father didn’t want the missionary team in Asia, while Jesus didn’t want it in Bithynia. Rather, the Father and the Son were united with the Spirit. All three persons of the undivided Trinity had the same plan and the same will. But when you hear from the Holy Spirit, sometimes He emphasizes that you are hearing from the Father. Sometimes He emphasizes that you are hearing from Jesus. This time, He emphasized first one and then the other. The team was not allowed to go left into Asia or right into Bithynia.

D. Straight on to Troas on the Western Edge of Asia, v. 8

Instead, the Triune God sent them straight on. You can imagine how Silas and Timothy were thinking “Well, this is totally different from the original plan. We were going to hit Pisidian Antioch and then probably head to Cyprus and then back to Syrian Antioch. Instead, here we are, trekking across Asia Minor for no good reason.” They just walked and walked across Asia Minor. Today, the trip by road from Iconium (Konya) to the ruins of Troas is 460 miles and will take you nine hours by car. Paul was many things, but he was not a vehicle owner. According to Google, it is 437 miles on foot to take the shortest route between these two places, and it will take you two straight weeks of ten-hour days to cover the distance.

So the missionary team, prevented by God from carrying out their intentions, is instead hoofing it across Turkey, getting a good view of the scenery but not finding any synagogues or starting any churches. Can you imagine the frustration, the annoyance, the lethargy of this team as they spent weeks walking with no plan?

III. The Plan Completely Reimagined, vv. 9-12

And then they come down to Troas, a nice little spot just south of the Dardanelles. Surely they are staring out at the waters of the Aegean and just shaking their heads. What is the deal, exactly? We are now more than two weeks out of our way, farther and farther from our friends in Pisidian Antioch, and not allowed to go seek out places to do mission work!

A. The Macedonian Call, v. 9

They go to bed and there Paul has a vision. He sees a man requesting help in Macedonia. Apparently a number of commentators cannot figure out how Paul knew the man was Macedonian. This is mind-blowing, folks, because the man literally says “us.” That means that he effectively said “I am a Macedonian.” Boy, I wonder how in the world Paul figured out that he was hearing from a Macedonian. If I see a Japanese guy in a vision saying “Come to Japan and help us,” I will know that he is Japanese. If a Mexican says “Come to Mexico and help us,” same thing. Now, yes, presumably you could see someone who looks like an Arab saying “Come to South Korea and help us.” That would leave you a little confused. You would probably conclude that there was an Arab population in S. Korea that needed help. But if the guy looks

like he could be Macedonian, and he calls Macedonians “us,” then you can probably figure out what nationality he is.

Anyway, Paul has this vision.

B. Evaluating the Vision, v. 10

The team, presented with the vision, adds up the evidence. That’s what the verb used here means. It refers to piecing information together. Now, what information did the team have?

First, God had prevented them from visiting a bunch of the churches planted on the first missionary journey.

Second, He had brought them all the way out here, to the very edge of Asia. Like Peter, who had been led northward to the very limit of Palestinian territory before being called onward to Cornelius’ home, so Paul is led to the very edge of the territory in which he had previously ministered before being called onward.

Third, the vision seemed legit. It was a call to do what they knew God had called them to do. It was not a man saying “Hey, I really need someone who can commit to a five-year contract making tents right here in Troas.” It was a man saying “Come help us,” which Paul of course interpreted to mean “evangelize us.”

C. Concluding that God had called the team to Macedonia, v. 10

So I want you to recognize that the verb does not say that they obeyed the vision. It says that they concluded that the vision was legit and was God’s way of calling them to preach the gospel. Now, remember, they had already been sent by their church with the explicit purpose of preaching the gospel. The nature of God’s guidance here was strictly as to where they ought to engage in the main work they had set out on. Thus, if we simply transfer the situation whole-cloth to today, the only thing that involved God’s supernatural intervention or turn-by-turn directions here was where they were going to minister. If you are looking for that sort of direction from God, you will only find it after God has already called you to be a missionary, after you have been commissioned by your local church, and after you have already had one missions term on the field. Only then can you expect that God will give you this sort of inner prompting or whatever it was that prevented the team from going into Asia or Bithynia.

My point is this: Don’t expect too much in the way of daily directions from God on how to live your life, or where to move to, or what job to take. Luke makes it very clear that yes, God did direct. But He did so in a very narrow sense — nothing along the lines of “abandon your profession and move to a new city to take up a new profession,” but only “keep doing what you’re doing, but do it in Macedonia now instead of in Lycaonia and Pamphylia and Syria.”

D. Sailing Across to Philippi, vv. 11-12

So Paul, Silas, and Timothy, now joined by Luke, sail across to Philippi. They stop for the night at Samothrace, disembark at Neapolis, and walk the ten miles up to Philippi. They are officially in Macedonia. Again, I would urge you to realize that God emphatically did not lay a burden for Philippi on Paul’s heart. The Spirit of Jesus did not whisper to Silas that they should take the ship that stopped for the night at Samothrace. Rather, God’s guidance told them “Preach in Macedonia.” It did not tell them any more than that. This is important, because we read that the

Spirit directed them and we totally ignore the context which shows how totally limited this direction actually was. It was a command to honor the Lord by preaching His name wherever they were, and to go specifically to Macedonia. But beyond that, they had to use their sanctified common sense.

IV. The Point: Christ Is Still Directing the Proclamation of the Gospel

Luke's major point in this section is that Jesus is directing the proclamation of the gospel.

A. Not How He Directs, but That He Directs

The first thing to see with this is not how He directs, but that He does so. The passage of Scripture closest to presenting a guide to finding God's will is a little passage we call 'The Ten Commandments.' We're looking at it in evening worship services these days. But what I want you to recognize is that yes, God directs you, and no, Scripture never presents a step-by-step guide to discovering what, exactly, He is directing you to do. In other words, you can't force God to decide where you should work, where you should live, or who you should marry. That is not His job; that's your job. He directs you in moral things and for the rest He tells you to live your life according to the general principles of wisdom and morality. Fear Him and keep His commandments; this is the whole duty of man. "Getting in the center of His will" is *not* part of the duty of man. If He is calling you to med school, you'll know. If He is calling you to Macedonia, you'll know. But notice that His directing is simultaneously very specific and very limited. He is perfectly capable of pointing out a particular house, as He did to Ananias in describing how to find Paul and to Cornelius in describing how to find Peter. But He did not send Paul to Lydia's house. He simply brought him to Troas and then said "Go to Macedonia." He did not say which part of Macedonia. He did not say how long to stay. He did not say how many cities of Macedonia Paul should visit. He just said "Help Macedonians." The rest was up to the mission team.

Jesus is involved in the propagation of the gospel to the ends of the earth. He carefully supervises it and guides His people. But that does not mean that He gives turn-by-turn directions to mission work or anything else in this world.

B. Don't be so stuck to your plans that you can't submit to Jesus' Spirit

So I urge you, brothers and sisters, if you ever find yourself spending two weeks walking across Turkey, don't rage and say "Well, this wasn't in the plan, and now I'm good and angry." Say "God has some purpose in this. I don't know what it is, but I know that I need to obey Him while I walk across Turkey." Often our plans do not go the way we wanted, whether it's in little things like when we get to that particular errand or in bigger things like when we get another child born in our family. The fact is that God will guide you, through providential hindrances, open doors, promptings, and possibly even visions. Don't agonize over how He will guide you — but if you think He is guiding you, you need to obey Him. But check your intuitions against those of your spouse, your church, and your elders. If God is telling you something that the rest of us are missing, He's not telling it to you. Obviously I'm referring to situations of calling. If you are in a church where everyone else says "The Bible has no real problem with being gay," then yes, God

is telling you something that the rest of them are missing. But if you think you are called to Bulgaria, and your family and church don't think so, then you need to stay out of Bulgaria.

Paul fought with his teammate over whether to take John Mark. He did not fight with his team about whether God was really calling them to Macedonia. The whole team agreed in assessing Paul's vision. They submitted to what the Spirit was telling them.

C. Be especially open to calls to missions work, ministry, and office in the church

Finally, I urge you to be especially open to calls to mission work, and more broadly to any kind of ministry that you had not considered before. Paul and Silas were going to visit existing churches. They did not plan to go to new territories and plant new churches; they did not plan to walk to the far end of Asia Minor. Somehow it just happened, under the special guidance of the Spirit of Jesus. Are you open to those calls? Will you listen? Paul and Silas did, and they brought the gospel to Europe for the first time. Don't be overly afraid of missing God's leading. When He's leading, you'll know. He'll take you where you ought to be. But definitely seek to be open to His leadings, for He is still expanding His Kingdom to the ends of the earth. Amen.