

introduction

Most of us think that if we could just know what the future held, and exactly what we were supposed to do, then we would be happy. Even Christians can assume that all would be well if we just knew God's will for our lives. However, the book of Acts, and the example of Paul's missionary work in chapter 16, show us that God leads us with "no" as well as with "yes." A church that follows the leading of the Spirit is sensitive to the fullness of God's leading through his Spirit, and is willing to think, plan, debate, and change as the Holy Spirit directs. We follow God not because he tells us all the particulars about the future, but because he has guaranteed our future in Jesus Christ, allowing us to risk everything, including our own plans, for his sake.



Have you ever had a plan disappointed? What was the result?

read

Acts 16:6-10 (NIV)

⁶ Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Take a few moments to reflect on the Scripture. Share some insights, questions, or points that strike you. Then read what follows.

context

These events likely occur in the year 51 AD. This passage details the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey, which was to revisit prior church plants and encourage and build up the new believers. Little did Paul know that instead, God would bring the gospel from Asia

into Europe through Macedonia. As Paul and his missionary team headed from their base in Antioch towards the Asian provinces, which was probably southwest, God's Spirit forbade them from going there. Then, as the team turned north instead, God's Spirit prohibited them again. Finally, with no other direction left open, Paul turned northwest, towards Troas (ancient Troy). There, Paul has a vision of a Macedonian man calling for help. Then the team, "concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them," proceeded to cross the Aegean Sea into Macedonia.

the Spirit says "no"

Paul had a strategic, gospel-centered mission in mind for his journey. Like a good overseer, he planned to return to the churches he had already planted and see how they were doing. Nothing in Paul's plans were unfaithful or disobedient, and yet God had other designs. What we see in this passage is a compelling balance of human initiative and divine guidance made possible by the close presence of the Holy Spirit and a community of Christians who are sensitive to the Spirit's leading, even when that leading contradicted Paul's purpose for his journey. Even though he had likely brainstormed a mission statement, pitched supporters, raised funds, and paid for the trip, Paul and his team were able to do two important things: recognize the Spirit's leading, and prioritize the Spirit's leading.

"The norm that is suggested by Acts is the taking of initiatives for the gospel, with wise planning (cf. [James 1:5-8](#)) and a loving concern for those we seek to reach, trusting God to open or close the way as he sees fit."

—David G. Peterson

discuss

1. What does the leading of the Spirit mean to you?
2. How can we know whether the leading that we sense is from God or not?

3. Has God ever led you into something difficult or disappointing?

the Spirit says “yes”

Finally, Paul receives positive guidance from God. He sees a vision of a Macedonian man asking for help for his people, and the missionary team decides that God has called them to go preach in Macedonia. The commentator John Stott notes that, in hindsight, this is an epochal change in Christian history. Though Paul could not know it, Europe would become the center of Christian missionary work for almost two thousand years, and it was from there that Christianity would go to “the ends of the earth.” What Paul went on to experience was great gospel results and, at the same time, jail, riots, beatings, and eventually his own death.

Christians are to follow the Spirit, whether he leads us to prosperity or martyrdom. Interestingly, in verse seven, the Spirit is called “the Spirit of Jesus.” This reminds us that it is Jesus who sends the Spirit, the other Advocate. And it reminds us that Jesus is the ultimate example of following God’s lead. Jesus said to God his Father, “Not my will, but yours be done.” God’s will for Jesus led to the cross, and the cross led to our salvation. Because God’s ultimate will is our salvation, we can follow his particular leading each day, no matter what.

*“’Tis Jesus, the First and the Last,
Whose Spirit shall guide us safe home;
We’ll praise him for all that is past,
And trust him for all that’s to come.”*

—Joseph Hart, “How Good Is the God We Adore”

discuss

4. How can we, as a church community, “conclude” that something is God’s will?

5. How does the good news of the gospel balance our disappointment and pain when our plans fail?

group application

John Stott writes about this passage:

“From this we may learn that usually God's guidance is not negative only but also positive (some doors close, others open); not circumstantial only, but also rational (thinking about our situation); not personal only, but also corporate (a sharing of the data with others, so that we can mull over them together and reach a common mind).”

How can we, as a group, help each other see the guiding of the Holy Spirit?

upcoming

- Thursday, April 30 | **Gotham Fellowship Applications due**
Apply to join next year's Gotham class and experience rich Christian community and intentional discipleship. Work through the calling to work for God's renewing of all things and wake up inspired, impassioned, and with joy to start a new day.
redeemerws.com/gotham
- Sunday, May 3 | **Congregational Meeting, 1 pm in the sanctuary**
RWS members are requested to attend this meeting and participate in the annual election of leaders.
- Saturday, May 16 | **Young Adults: Salsa into Spring, 6:30-9 pm**
All young adults (21+) are invited for an evening of Latin rhythm, food and fun! Limited spots are available; register by May 9 for early bird pricing.
redeemerws.com/salsa