

ACTS 16:6-12 ESV

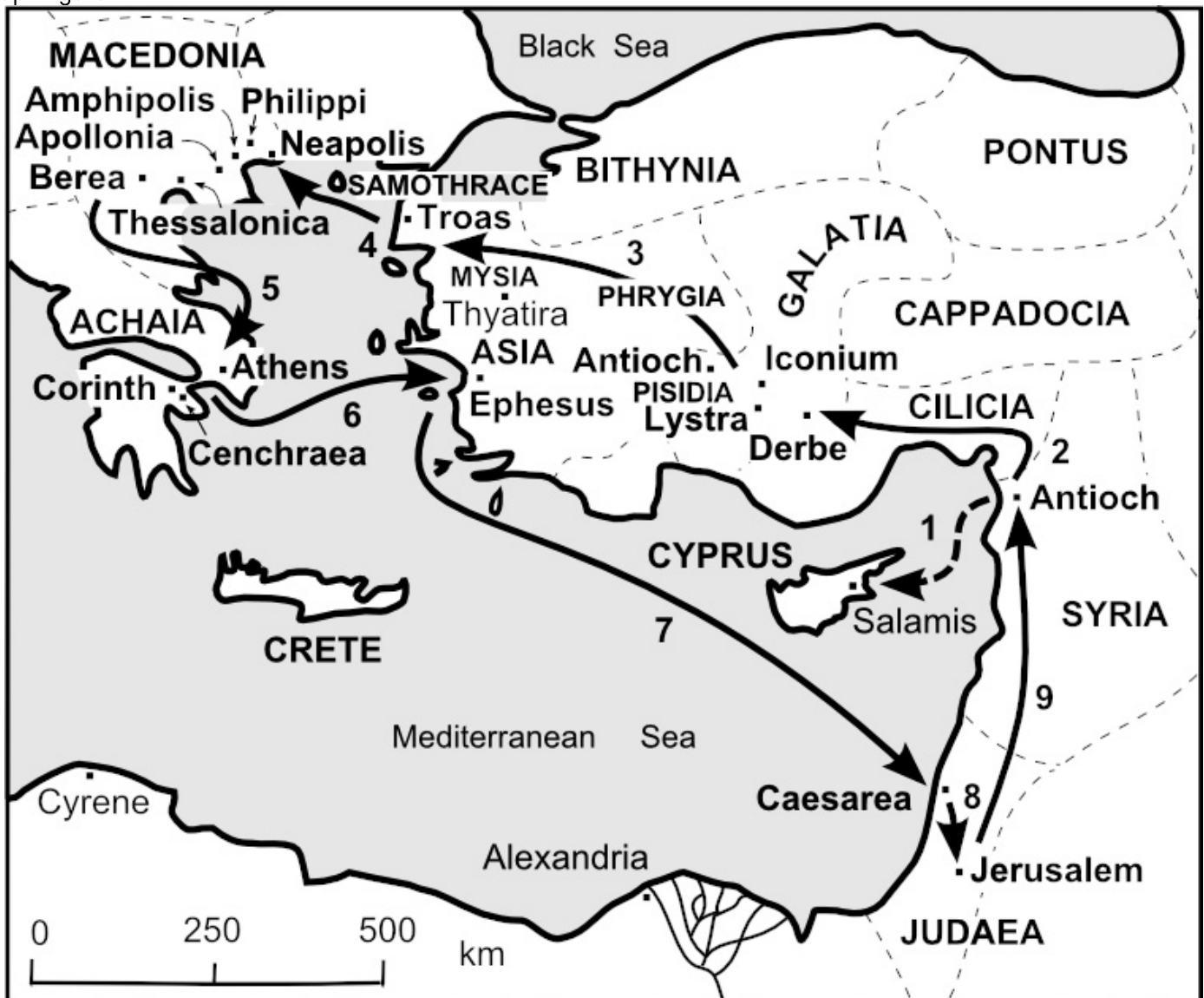
6 And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. 7 And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. 8 So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. 9 And a 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. 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.

STRUCTURE

Structure:

- I. Forbidden by the Spirit from Asia (16:6)
- II. Disallowed by the Spirit from Bithynia (16:7)
- III. Led by a vision to Macedonia (16:8-10)
- IV. Guided by wisdom to Philippi (16:11-12)

Map: Figure 1.1



GENERAL COMMENTARY:

This brief section is far more than a roadmap of Paul's travels; it is a roadmap for all of us: how to spread the gospel and fulfill your mission. Paul and his team do not rely on mere human wisdom—although they don't neglect it either. Human wisdom comes into play at the end of the section when the team strategically chooses "a leading city of the district" (16:12) to establish a home base for reaching a whole region.

Most of the section focuses not on human wisdom, however, but God's leading. The whole Godhead engages Paul's team: "the Holy Spirit" (16:6), "the Spirit of Jesus" (16:7), and "God [the Father]" (16:10). Before we baptize "all nations" into "the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Mat. 28:19), we must listen for the voice of the Father and the Son, mediated to us by the Spirit. Because of the oneness of the Triune God, this will not sound to us like three different voices. Rather, our one God guides us to the most bountiful harvest—if we will listen.

Luke's mention of the Father, Son, and Spirit highlights the "inseparable operations of the Trinity." Augustine describes the doctrine like this: "As the Father and Son and Holy Spirit are inseparable, so do they work inseparably." Here, they cooperate in directing missionary endeavors; the Persons also cooperated in creation (Gen. 1:1-2; John 1:1-3) and redemption (Heb. 9:14). Luke highlights this cooperation while also conveying through his word choice the eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son (see below). As you can see, the inspired author found it important—in a story about missionaries—to teach about the unity and distinctions between Persons of the Godhead. Missionary work is driven by the passion of our Triune God.

Likewise, our passion for saving the lost finds its anchor in God's great heart. The closer we grow in friendship with God, the more we think and feel like He does about the lost. We'll never sustain a passion for missions based on statistics and stories alone. We need God's friendship so we can share His heart.

This friendship grows as we journey with Him. Friends journey together, and as they do, it builds trust. This explains why the Triune God gradually unveils His plan to Paul's team. First, He denies their entry into Asia, and then He shuts down their attempt to reach Bithynia. Finally, He leads them by a vision of the night to Macedonia. Through closed doors and open doors, God keeps them on their toes—leaning forward to hear His voice. This section teaches us how to discern God's guidance. It also emphasizes the necessity of discernment for fulfilling His mission. Jesus knows where "the fish are biting," and He's willing to guide His friends there.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

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.

—"And": after picking up Timothy, Paul's future spiritual son, and strengthening the churches where they had formerly planted, Paul and his new team venture forward.

—How they venture forward is Luke's primary emphasis in these verses: not by conventional wisdom or geographical planning, but by the Holy Spirit.

—"Phrygia and Galatia": these regions would have been located in modern Turkey and included the churches Paul and Barnabas had already planted.

—"having been forbidden... did not allow":

- So far, God's guidance has been negative. Doors have closed, not opened. God guides us through both negative and positive means. We must open our spirits to receive guidance, even if it frustrates us.
- We don't know how the Spirit forbade their entry into Asia and Bithynia. It could have been through a dream or a vision. It could have been through the Spirit's audible voice or internal leading. It could have been through the words of a prophet or an angel. Alternatively, God could have sovereignly closed doors through natural means: persecution, denial by governmental officials, bad weather, an injury or illness, etc. On the latter, Paul preached the gospel in Galatia because of a "bodily ailment" (Gal. 4:13).
- I'm reminded of James 4:13-16: 13 *"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'— 14 yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. 15 Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.' 16 As it*

is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." We must be open to the Lord's correction, even if we've already planned our direction. In fact, to not be open to His redirection is arrogance; it is boasting about tomorrow. Just like we must hold things loosely—such as money or ministries or jobs or opportunities—so we must also hold time loosely. The future is in God's hands, not ours.

- Another time the Spirit overrode Paul's will was in Acts 20:22, when the Spirit "compelled" (Lit. "bound") him to go to Jerusalem. Later, when prophets warned him not to go, he went anyway because the Spirit had already bound him to.
- If God only tells you what you wanted to hear, it's not God that you're hearing.
- Stott: "Livingstone tried to go to China, but God sent him to Africa instead. Before him, Carey planned to go to Polynesia in the South Seas, but God guided him to India. Judson went to India first, but was driven on to Burma. We too in our day, Pierson concludes, 'need to trust him for guidance and rejoice equally in his restraints and constraints.'"

—"They went... they attempted":

- Closed doors did not disrupt the mission. They continued going. They "attempted" to walk through new doors. In the absence of clarity, we go and make disciples. When in doubt, preach the gospel. Do what you know, and God will show you what you don't.
- I'm reminded of the Joseph story. Joseph didn't know how God would fulfill his grandiose dreams. It seemed impossible after suffering the injustices of slavery and imprisonment. All Joseph knew was: don't sleep with Potiphar's wife; don't give into lust; don't give up on God. At the right time, God released Joseph from prison and fulfilled His promises. In the same way, if we do what we know—hold on to God—God will show us what we don't. In the context of Acts: keep preaching the gospel.

—"forbidden... to speak the word in Asia":

- This seems like a strange thing for the Holy Spirit to forbid! To forbid preaching the word?! What in the world? Shouldn't they have continually preached the word?
- Of course, we should always preach the word. Paul and his companions no doubt shared the gospel everywhere they went, but here, the Spirit forbade them from speaking in a specific location: Asia. Asia would come to faith in due course, but it wasn't yet time. See Acts 19:8-10: *And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.*
- Just because a ministry is good and right—here, preaching God's Word in Asia—that doesn't mean we can assume it's God's calling right now. We must obey the Spirit. Because Paul's team did, the door to Asia opened so wide that "all the residents" heard the gospel in that region!
- Practically, there are many good ministries: feeding the poor, caring for widows and orphans, rehabilitating the addicted, and more. Are we all called to every ministry at all times? Of course not. We must be led by the Spirit.
- "speak the word": what did this mean? To preach the whole Bible? To specifically share the gospel of salvation? Something in between? Specifically, it is called, "the word of the Lord" in 19:10; throughout Acts, "the Lord" is almost always Jesus. To "speak the word of the Lord" is to tell the Jesus story. We have seen this modeled throughout Acts. Paul and Peter have preached the Jesus story using the whole Bible.
- "Asia" was different than what we think of today. It did not include Russia, China, or India. Asia was more like coastal Turkey. To the north were "Mysia" (16:7) and "Troas" (16:8). To the south and east were "Phrygia and Galatia" (16:6). See Figure 1.1 above.

—"the Holy Spirit... the Spirit of Jesus":

- Both of these parallel phrasings refer to the same Holy Spirit. "Spirit of Jesus" does not refer to "the Spirit that IS Jesus" but rather "the Spirit that COMES FROM Jesus"—applying Christ's work of redemption to our everyday lives.

- If the Spirit was the *same* as Jesus, we would not have a Triune God. The three Persons of the Trinity are co-equal and co-eternal. The Father is our eternal God, the Spirit is our eternal God, and the Son is our eternal God; yet, we worship one eternal God.
- In the words of the Athanasian Creed, *"we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the substance."* To confound the Persons is to mix them up and blend them together; to divide their substance is to overly separate them as though the "Persons" of the Trinity are more like "People"—having distinct wills and separate personalities.
- In other passages, the Holy Spirit is called "the Spirit of your Father" (Mat. 10:20), "the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:19), "the Spirit of his Son" (Gal. 4:6), and—in a singular verse—"the Spirit of God [the Father, and]... the Spirit of Christ" (Rom. 8:9).
- All these passages point to the "procession" of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son. In the words of the Nicene Creed, *"We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son."*
- The Holy Spirit has eternally proceeded from, or emanated from, both the Father and the Son. Therefore, He is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, having proceeded eternally from both.
- By interchanging the names for the Holy Spirit, it seems that Luke intends to teach us basic "Pneumatology"—the study of the Holy Spirit. This section is deeply theological at the same time that it is incredibly practical. Theology shapes practice.
- Schreiner: "In v. 6 it is the Holy Spirit who guides, in v. 7 the Spirit of Jesus, and then in v. 10 Paul concludes God the Father has called them to Macedonia. The triune God directs Paul and his companions to preordained place."

8 So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. 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.

—"So, passing by Mysia":

- "So" indicates that the closed doors drove the next action of passing by Mysia.
- Shut doors should not shut us down; they should drive us to next steps.
- Somewhat circuitously, they would have avoided Asia with an arc-like path toward Mysia in the north. Sometimes God leads us on circuitous paths. In God's eyes, the shortest distance between two points is not necessarily a straight line.
 - The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years.
 - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all wandered, dwelling mostly in tents. When they tried to settle—like Abraham in Egypt or Isaac in Gerar—they got into trouble.
 - In its present state, this world is not our home. We are all wandering, even when we are "settled." We await a "city without foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10).
 - God's people must not be too quick to settle, nor should we fear wandering. Wandering in the wilderness deepens our faith and prepares us for our Promised Land.
 - In the case of Paul's team, they learned dependence on the Spirit's guidance. Oh, how important that lesson is! Oh, that we might hear Him and obey! Lord, help us. Our ears are too often closed. Our eyes are too often distracted. Set our eyes and ears on You. Give us the heart to heed what You say, even if it's hard.
- Stott: "having come from the east, and having found the south-westerly and northerly roads obstructed, the only direction left open to them was northwest." This explains why they passed by Mysia.

—"they went to Troas": Troas lay right at the bridge between modern Turkey and Greece. They had no particular leading to head there; they only had leadings about *not* going elsewhere.

—"a vision appeared to Paul in the night": dreams and visions are essentially the same. Dreams are night visions. Visions are like daydreams.

—"a man of Macedonia": Macedonia was north, in Greece.

—“urging... Come over to Macedonia and help us”: In the book, *T4T* (Training For Trainers), which explains how to strategically multiply disciples and churches to reach the lost, I remember reading about this dream in the context of “three calls” to reach the lost. These include:

- *The call from above*: in 2 Corinthians 5, God calls us to be ambassadors of Christ, making an appeal to the broken world—be reconciled!
- *The call from below*: in Luke 16, Jesus tells a parable about a man who calls out from Hades, the place of the dead and of torment, asking that he might go back to earth and tell the truth to his brothers so they can repent. Our “call from below” is the voice of those suffering now in Hades, crying out (at least, metaphorically) for us to reach their spiritually lost loved ones.
- *The call from the earth*: in Acts 16, as we read above, the Macedonian man called out for Paul and the team to reach them. Likewise, metaphorically, the lost cities around us are crying out for us to open our mouth and proclaim the good news.

—“immediately, we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them”:

- “immediately” magnifies their prompt obedience to the Holy Spirit. If we want to succeed in our assignment from God, we must be quick to listen.
- I have always advised people against making huge life decisions based solely on a prophetic word. But does not Paul’s team do that here? Sort of. Sort of not.
 - Paul’s team was on a mission already and had received several indicators about the Spirit’s direction. It was not just one prophetic word but the third successive prophetic word that ultimately led them in this direction.
 - Paul had the dream, but “we” concluded its interpretation. Paul did not interpret the vision in isolation. His whole team interpreted it together.
 - It’s not as though Paul and his team were rooted on Troas, working careers and raising children. They were on a mission trip, and they had no idea where to go next prior to this vision. This is therefore not analogous to a father of five, for instance, selling everything and moving to Timbuktu based on a single prophecy.
- One way to know that God is the One speaking is by asking yourself: is this the kind of thing He would say? In this case, Paul’s team concluded that God had called them to preach the gospel. That sounds like something God would say because He says it often in His Word!
- The Scriptures may not always inform you what to do in every specific instance—whether to live in OKC or move to San Francisco, for instance—but in the Scriptures we learn the “playing field,” so to speak—what’s “in bounds” and “out of bounds.” On the negative side, this means God won’t speak in a way that contradicts the revelation of His character in the written word. For instance, He won’t speak to you some new rule of sexuality or morality, and He won’t give you a new gospel. On the positive side, the Scriptures provide general guidelines for discerning whether a perceived “revelation” fits within His character. That’s what we see here in Acts.
- A more contemporary example of God speaking in a way that aligns with His character as revealed in Scripture is the story of Evan Roberts. Roberts was the father of the Welsh Revival in the early 20th century that led to (an estimated) 100,000 converts in Wales and millions globally. It started with a 26-year-old student named Evan Roberts, who felt like he might be hearing the voice of God. He approached the principal of his college and said, “I hear a voice that tells me I must go home and speak to the young people in my home church. Mr. Phillips, is that the voice of the devil or the voice of the Spirit?” Mr. Phillips responded, “The devil never gives orders like that. You can have the week off!” Roberts took the week off, preached to his youth group, and the world was turned upside down. Whenever God speaks, it will always agree with His heart as revealed in Scripture, and it will never contradict the Scripture.
- Stott: *“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); and 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).”*

—Why did God wait so long to give Paul the dream? Why did they have to wander in every direction, feeling one slammed door after another?

- As I said before, God strengthens us through wandering. Wandering forces us to rely on the voice of the Spirit—not our best efforts or strategies or preconceived notions.
- One of God's favorite speaking methods is "the breadcrumb trail" method. We saw this earlier in Acts 8, where an angel and then the Spirit guided Philip's mission. We saw again in Acts 10-11, where Peter and Cornelius had separate visions and supernatural experiences that guided them together. Peter was at first "perplexed" by his vision but later said, "now I know" why all this is happening. This is the breadcrumb trail method. It would be nice if God spoke to us by downloading the future into our brains. But that's not how He works. He wants a friendship with us. Therefore, we must learn to trust Him as we journey with His Spirit, step by step, one breadcrumb at a time.
- In the examples I just noticed, we observed the gospel extending to new frontiers through the Spirit's voice. I could have also mentioned Acts 13, where the Spirit says to the leaders of Antioch, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work I have called them to do." Luke is driving home the point that the church's mission is Spirit-driven. Since (as we learned earlier) the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, we must conclude that effective mission work is sovereignly guided by the Triune God.

—One reason why we don't lead nearly as many people to Christ as we could is that, too often, we're not listening to the Spirit of Jesus. We're like Peter, who fished all night, relying strictly on his expertise, and he didn't catch a thing. The next morning, Jesus tells him, "Throw your net on the other side of the boat," and in one cast his net is full. Like any good fisherman, Jesus knew where the fish were biting. No skilled fisherman fishes the whole lake. He knows where to drop a line. If we want to reach OKC for Jesus, we must listen to the Spirit about where to drop lines.

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.

—These closing verses detail the route to Philippi, north from Troas.

—Paul's vision told them to go to Macedonia; it never told them "go to Philippi." So how did they land on Philippi? Luke emphasizes that it was "a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony." Paul's team did not choose the outskirts of Macedonia but rather a leading city. This was strategic. By reaching the city, they could reach the region. From a missionary standpoint, Philippi provided the beachhead for the gospel to invade all of Macedonia.

—Even when God speaks clearly, He doesn't give all the details. In the absence of details, we must learn to fill in the blanks with the wisdom God gives. God said to go to Macedonia, so they obeyed the Spirit. Within Macedonia they went to Philippi, employing their wisdom as missionaries and church planters. The Spirit's revelation and the Spirit's wisdom do not contradict one another. They operate in tandem. The Third Person of the Trinity is "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation" (Eph. 1:17).

—In charismatic circles, we sometimes discount strategy and planning as if these are unspiritual. We imagine that God's leading will always come in dreams, visions, and the like. While affirming that He speaks in these ways, God also speaks and sovereignly guides us through natural means (as we saw above), strategy, and planning.

—When I first became a Lead Pastor, I experienced this tension. Some people in my church felt like if something wasn't spontaneous, it wasn't spiritual. Well, I'm a planner. So I created a phrase that we often repeated over the years: "We plan by the Spirit, and we improvise by the Spirit." I welcome God's spontaneous interventions, but this does not preclude the need for planning. Proverbs 8 reminds us that wisdom has "hewn her seven pillars" and prepared a lavish feast with great time and energy. The point is that wisdom plans. Wisdom prepares. Wisdom thinks ahead. Since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of wisdom, we should not reject these aspects of our faith. When it came to church planting, Paul considered himself a "wise master builder." He used that wisdom by traveling to Philippi. At the same time, the Holy Spirit is "the Spirit of revelation." Paul listened to the revelation of the Spirit by heeding his dream. Wisdom and revelation are both spiritual. We plan by the Spirit, and we improvise by the Spirit.