

Chapter 40: The Spirit of Jesus

Acts 16:6–15

Throughout this study, we have been examining God’s vision for his church. In the latter half of Acts, we see the rapid expansion of the church through the evangelistic and missionary endeavors of Paul and his companions. With the entire world in front of them, a major question arises: where exactly should they go? Their movements are not haphazard, and neither are they self-directed. They do not chase after what seems like the largest opportunities for them, and some of the places they go (including Philippi, here in Acts 16:6–15) will not at first seem to be the wisest use of their time, judged according to human wisdom. Nevertheless, this passage shows that, in guiding them, *the Spirit of Jesus builds Jesus’ church*.

The Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:6–10)

Taking Timothy with them, Paul and Silas continued their missionary journey. As Luke details the travel of the missionaries, he tells us why they took the route that they did. That is, they “went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia” since they had “been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia” (v. 6).¹ Then, Luke tells us that a similar prohibition took place in the next leg of their journey: “And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them” (v. 7). At a broad level, their travels move them away from Asia and toward Europe. Yet, Polhill rightly observes that “The geographical scheme is certainly not the dominant motif in this section: the divine leading *is*. Father (v. 10), Son (v. 7), and Spirit (v. 6) together led Paul to the decisive new breakthrough—the mission to Macedonia, the witness on European soil.”²

These two statements raise larger questions, however. First, why does Luke speak of the “Holy Spirit” first, and then the “Spirit of Jesus” second? This refers to the leadership of the same third person of the Holy Trinity in guiding the apostles on their missionary journeys. The Spirit is often called the “Holy Spirit,” and the title “Spirit of Jesus” reminds us that the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father (John 15:26) but also from the Son (John 16:26).³ As we have considered since the beginning of this study, the book of Luke “dealt with all that Jesus *began* to do and teach,” whereas, by implication, the book of Acts deals with what Jesus *continues* to do and teach (Acts 1:1). The Holy Spirit who leads the church in their mission is the Holy Spirit whom the exalted King Jesus himself sent from heaven (Acts 2:32).

Second, why did the Holy Spirit forbid the missionaries from preaching in certain areas? The Scriptures answer this question only indirectly, through Paul’s own statement of wonder at God’s

¹ “The participle is causal and thus antecedent. They went through the Phrygian and Galatian region because they were prevented from speaking the Word in Asia.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 643.)

² Polhill, *Acts*, 345.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 646.

wisdom: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom. 11:33). The Lord has his purposes for all that he does, and he rarely explains those purposes.⁴ We cannot search out the depths of those purposes, and neither can we criticize them, for we cannot fathom even a tiny portion of the factors that he calculates.

Another part of this answer to why the Holy Spirit prevents them from going to *certain* places is to direct them toward *other* places. After continuing on their journey (“passing by Mysia” and “down to Troas”), Luke tells us that “a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’” (v. 9). After closing certain doors, the Holy Spirit now opens other doors by directing the missionaries to Macedonia. Lenski writes, “The Macedonian man symbolizes, not the whole heathen world, but that specific part of it to which God would at any special time send us. He does not now use visions to direct us, but he does use plain providential indications, and these are the cries to us to come and to help.”⁵ Bock (citing Stott) expands on what those “plain providential indications” might be for those of us living today:

Stott (1990: 261) speaks of the elements that often characterize divine guidance here: God’s use of a period of time, the circumstances of open and closed doors, pondering what was taking place, and seeking response and input from others in pursuit of a kind of corporate wisdom.⁶

Indeed, the text emphasizes that, after Paul saw the vision, he “immediately” went on to Macedonia, “concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (v. 10). Paul knew that he was called to preach, and it had to be frustrating not to go into regions that lacked the gospel. Now that Paul knew where the Lord was directing him, he wasted no time.

Jesus’ Church (Acts 16:11–15)

We should not miss the subtle shift in language in v. 10 from “they” to “we.” Here, the author of Acts quietly slips himself into the storyline, accompanying Paul, Silas, and Timothy on their journey, beginning on the sea (v. 11–12). Where he met up with the other missionaries, and how they agreed to have him come with them is a detail that the Scriptures do not give us.⁷ With a modesty that declines to distract attention from the main storyline, Luke simply allows the story to progress into “Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony” where the missionaries “remained...some days” (v. 12).

Philippi was an area that was wealthy and politically powerful as a Roman colony.⁸ Yet, it was an area with

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:97–98.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 649.

⁶ Bock, *Acts*, 528, citing J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 261.

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 650.

⁸ “The area was rich with copper, silver, and gold deposits and was part of a fertile plain, tucked as it were against the hills of the area. So it was a wealthy city. The Roman influence was strong here because of Philippi’s status as a Roman colony, which made it legally like a Roman city.” (Bock, *Acts*, 533.)

a dearth of any kind of biblical faith. As we have seen, Paul regularly began his missionary work in new areas by visiting the local synagogue; however, we read of no synagogue here. Bruce writes, “That can only mean that there were very few Jews in the place; had there been ten Jewish men, they would have sufficed to constitute a synagogue.”⁹ Lacking ten men, Paul only finds a group of women who had gathered in a “place of prayer” by the riverside. Lenski writes, “Only a little group of women—yet Paul did not despise this humble beginning. Let no preacher despise even the smallest audience and imagine that he need not do his best for so few. The very smallness of a group of hearers is sometimes fraught with special blessing for the few who are present. It has often been remarked that the vision shows ‘a man, a Macedonian,’ and here Paul found a few women.”¹⁰

Lenski’s comment raises a larger curiosity. Why should the Lord have prevented Paul from entering into Asia when there was so little immediate opportunity for ministry in Philippi? Yet, to ask this question is to reason according to human wisdom. As Calvin writes, “Who would not have said that this journey was taken in hand foolishly which fell out so unhappily? But the Lord doth thus bring to pass his works under a base and weak kind, that his power may shine more clearly at length; and it was most meet that the beginnings of the kingdom of Christ should be so ordered, that they might taste [savor] of the humility of the cross.”¹¹ What began here did not start so quickly as in other places, where the apostles were able to quickly get to the heart of the city (albeit to divide the city between those who supported and those who hated them). Yet, the Lord had particular purposes in mind for the people in this place.

First, Paul and his missionary companions meet “a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God” (v. 14a). That she sold “purple goods” marked her out as a woman of considerable wealth, since purple goods were luxury items.¹² The language Luke uses to describe her conversion suggests that Lydia may not have been converted right away, but over the course of time when she “kept hearing” them speak.¹³ Ultimately, though, as “the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (v. 14b), “she thus became Paul’s first convert in Europe.”¹⁴

From here, Luke tells us that Lydia was baptized along with her household (v. 15a). Baptists often argue that the text is silent as to whether there was an infant in her household, but that objection misses the point. The point is that baptism is applied *by households* in the same way that circumcision was applied *by households* in the Old Testament. There are a number of ways that Luke could have described the baptism of numerous persons related to Lydia, but he chooses a particular term that links the baptismal practice with the Old Testament circumcision practice. Lenski asks rhetorically, “Where is the evidence that οἶκος [*oikos*] ever meant less than ‘household,’ ‘family,’ referred only to the adults to the exclusion of the children?”¹⁵ More than believing and receiving

⁹ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 331.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 655–56.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:100.

¹² Polhill wonders if the generosity Paul notes among the church at Philippi may have been significantly funded by Lydia as a “principal contributor” (Polhill, *Acts*, 349).

¹³ So Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 658.

¹⁴ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 331.

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 661.

baptism, Lydia insisted upon hospitality (v. 15b). Polhill writes: “Perhaps the wealthiest member of the Philippian church, Lydia embraced the ideal of the early church, not laying claim to what was hers but freely sharing it with her sisters and brothers in Christ (4:32).”¹⁶ The mission into Europe had begun!

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean for the Scriptures to call the Holy Spirit by the name, “the Spirit of Jesus,” in v. 7? Does this mean that the Son (made incarnate in the person of Jesus) and the Holy Spirit are the same person? If not, what does this suggest about the relationship between God the Son and God the Holy Spirit? How have we seen this relationship work out through the Book of Acts so far (Acts 1:1; 2:33)?
2. Why does the Holy Spirit prevent Paul and the missionaries from going into certain areas (vv. 6–7)? How does this relate to the doctrines of God’s providence and election? How does the Holy Spirit communicate his will for the missionaries to go to Macedonia (v. 9)? How do the missionaries respond once they receive this message (v. 10)? What does the call and the response indicate about God’s desire to spread his gospel through the nations?
3. What do we know about Philippi (v. 12)? What does the lack of a synagogue in Philippi suggest about the city? Where does Paul go instead of the synagogue (v. 13)? How do the missionaries approach this evangelistic opportunity? Who is Lydia, and what do we know about her (v. 14)? How does she come to faith in Christ (v. 14)? How should we interpret the practice of household baptisms in light of household circumcisions from the Old Testament (v. 15; cf. Gen. 17:12–13)?
4. Where is it hard for you to trust the providence and wisdom of God in your own life? What has been a disappointment from what you wanted to see? Why is it hard to receive not only good from God, but also evil/disaster/disappointment (Job 2:10)? How does the Spirit of Jesus use the small, seemingly insignificant, or even painful experiences of our lives to advance Christ’s kingdom in this world? Where is the Holy Spirit prompting you to trust him today?

¹⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, 350.