

Sometimes the Spirit Says, "No"

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Next week we will be wrapping up our study of the Spirit's Work as seen in the Book of Acts. We have seen how the Spirit directed the disciples and the early church to broaden its reach from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to begin reaching out to the "Ends of the Earth."

Today's passage even though only 5 verses long, has much to teach us about following the Spirit's direction.

I wonder if you are like me and that there have been times where you were really sure you were doing what you were supposed to –only to find that project or goal to seem blocked.

A small example of this, when I was in College I thought I was going to become an Old Testament Professor. So I went to Emory in Atlanta to look at the campus and see what would be necessary. I learned that in addition to learning Hebrew, I would have to become fluent in Modern French and German as well as in five other ancient languages. I knew that languages were not my strong suit, so I felt God was telling me that was not the direction to take. I have

had so many experiences in ministry that would never have happened if I had followed my own plans.

I bet you can think of examples from your own life or from other people.

It is frustrating when we think we know what God wants us to only to find ourselves unable to proceed. Or we proceed only to discover that we were not properly equipped or the project needs to be completely redone.

I have often wondered if Paul and his companions felt similarly frustrated by the events in today's text.

Their initial plan was to go into Asia to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. But they were "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia." Why? How? We don't know. All we know is that the Spirit stopped them from that path.

Then they think they are to go into an area called Bithynia. But again the Spirit stopped them. And we still don't know why or how.

The text tells us that they go to Troas. It does not feel like that is a destination, but just a place to stop – maybe to regroup.

It is while they are in Troas that Paul has a vision at night. There was a man from Macedonia pleading with Paul to come to Macedonia to help them. Paul and the others took this to be direction from the Spirit and headed that direction.

Macedonia was located in what is today Northern and Central Greece - southern Europe. We are told later in verse 12 that they end up in the Macedonian city of Philippi. You may recognize that name from the Book of Philippians.

The question, as it is each week, is what do we learn from this story? I read an article this week posted on the website of Northern Seminary (an American Baptist seminary) that posed a few suggested answers to this question.¹

- First, a good plan is not always the right plan.
- Second, we need humility to recognize when God says “No.”
- Third, being open to a new direction.
- And finally, Perseverance to find and do God’s will.

I would like for us to look at these suggestions a little more in depth.

First, we need to realize that a good plan is not always the right plan. Just because we think there is something that needs done, it doesn't mean that whatever ***IT*** is – is what ***we*** are supposed to do. It might be a “good thing” that we are planning, but if it is not the thing that God wants us to do, we will not truly succeed. Just because something seems good, it does not mean that it is right for us to do.

That is one of the lessons that Paul and his companions had to learn. Yes, it might have seemed good to take the news of Jesus to the people in Asia and Bithynia, but it was not the right time and Paul and his companions were not the right people. The Spirit of God had other plans.

Second, we need humility to recognize when God says “No.” This is a very hard item. I want to be right. I want to do what ***I think*** is the right thing. I had a pastor who used to say that we are sometimes like children that when we offer to help them put on a coat or something they respond with “I can do it myself.” It is hard to admit we might be wrong ***or at least mistaken.***

We are not given much information in the text about how the Holy Spirit stopped them. We just know that they felt certain that they were not to proceed with

their plans, but that they had to wait to figure out where they were to go.

Even if they were frustrated by the developments, this group with Paul recognized they were not to proceed with their plans. They needed to wait for God to direct them. That is humility.

Closely tied with this is the willingness to be open to a new direction. We often assume that our plans are God's plans. We do not always realize that "God is in the diversions or rerouting."ⁱ We might get stubborn and try to plow ahead -- only to hit more walls.

I like to think of it that God is in the interruptions. We may have our day planned out, but then a friend has a flat tire and needs someone to come get them or we get a phone call from someone who just needs someone to listen to them. These things can and do disrupt our plans. But if we see these disruptions as God moments, then our way of seeing the world and our role in it might just change.

Paul and his companions needed to wait to get a new direction from God. What if they did not wait? What if they proceeded with their plans? Well, the church in Philippi would not have been founded when it was and Paul probably would not have had the relationships with the people there. We would not,

most likely, have the Book of Philippians in the New Testament.

Much would have been different. And Paul would have been very frustrated in his ministry because he would not have followed God's direction.

Finally, we need perseverance to find and do God's will. I can only imagine the level of frustration this group with Paul felt. They had their plans. And for whatever reason, they could not proceed. They knew the Holy Spirit was stopping them.

The text tells us in verse 8, "so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas."ⁱⁱ I wonder if this was an aimless type of wandering. Not sure where to go, they end up in Troas. We don't know that to be the case, but it feels like they are at a loss for what to do next. So they just end up in a place.

It is clear that they were still looking for the Spirit's direction. The Spirit has clearly told them no two times. I would love to know how the "no" was communicated. Maybe it would help me to recognize when the Spirit tells me no. But that is not the point of this text. The point of this text is to recognize when our plans are not God's plans. It takes perseverance to find and do God's will.

This is one reason that I asked the church leadership to pray over the ministry suggestions you all gave a few weeks ago during our service at the park. It would be very easy for us to pick things to do that “look good.” But if it is not what God wants for us to do, then we will most likely find ourselves frustrated and unable to proceed.

We need to remember that a good plan is not always the right plan. We need humility to recognize when God says “No.” We need to be open to a new direction and finally, we need perseverance to find and do God’s will.

In most cases, these steps are not quick. We may need to spend a little time “in Troas” as it were, waiting for direction from the Holy Spirit. We may need to be willing to admit that sometimes the Spirit says, “No,” because God has something better planned for us.

ⁱ <https://www.seminary.edu/finding-the-right-way-forward-acts-166-10/>

ⁱⁱ **New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)**

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