

Journey 2: The Sovereign Spirit of Missions

Acts 16:1–40

Studies in Acts #20

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God is sovereign and in control of the world and our lives both in good times and bad. As our Catechism teaches us, it's in “rain and drought, fruitful and lean years...health and sickness, prosperity and poverty” that God's providence rules (HC, Q&A 27). How does this truth help us here? After the Jerusalem Council has convened to lead the church in a time of difficulty we read at the end of chapter 15 that Paul and Barnabus prepare to set out on second missionary journey (15:36). But when Barnabus wanted to take John Mark there was a disagreement between he and Paul so much so that it leads to a separation between them (15:37–39). Even the apostles had struggles in the ministry! And so Barnabus went with John Mark to Cyprus (15:39) and Paul went with Silas to Syria and Cilicia (15:40–41). Their disagreement was used in the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit to multiply Christ's kingdom by turning the second missionary journey into two journeys. And Paul and Silas' journey multiplied the number of missionaries as they met a young disciple, **Timothy** (16:1), took him along with them, and the end result was that **the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily** (v. 5). Acts 16 is an account of *the sovereign Spirit of missions*.

The Spirit's Sovereignty in Where He Saves (16:6–10)

First, in verses 6–10 we see *the Spirit's sovereignty in where he saves*. There's a clear

contrast in these verses between where Paul, Silas, and Timothy wanted to go and where the Holy Spirit wanted them to go. We learn that **they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia** (v. 6), which is in central Asia Minor, because they had **been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia** (v. 6), which was to the southwest. Imagine this was like their wanting to take Pacific Coast Highway but the Holy Spirit led them up I-5. Then we read **when they had come up to Mysia** (v. 7), which is the northwest corner of Asia Minor, **they attempted to go into Bithynia** (v. 7), which is clockwise and backwards to the northeast. Then listen to this: **but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them** (v. 7). Then we get a geographical conclusion: **So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas** (v. 8). The Spirit was moving them northwest through Asia Minor to get them to a port city.

This sounds so shocking to us! Why would the Holy Spirit actually **forbid** the gospel from being preached? Notice that the purpose of bringing them to Troas was to get them over the Aegean Sea to Macedonia. As they are in Troas we read in verse 9 that Paul sees a vision of a man in Macedonia crying out to him, **“Come over to Macedonia and help us,”** and in verse 10 he, Silas, and Timothy **immediately...sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.**

Was it because the Macedonians were more worthy and deserved the Gospel more than the Asians or Bithynians? Did God love Macedonia more? We must reject any idea that would say so. It was the secret will of God why Paul and Silas and Timothy were forbidden to preach in Asia and Bithynia, but it was the revealed will of God to preach in Macedonia. And by preaching in Macedonia we'll see in this chapter how the gospel came

to Lydia, a slave girl, and the Philippian jailer, and in chapter 17 to Thessalonica—one of Paul’s great ministerial joys—to the studious believers in Berea, to Athens and the great philosophical society on top of Mars Hill, and to Corinth.

We must learn what Paul, Silas, and Timothy learned and what missionaries have learned for generations: trust in the timing and direction of the Holy Spirit. We must humbly submit to the revealed things of the Word and the Spirit will do his work. It is revealed for us to preach, evangelize, make disciples, be outward focused, do everything according to the Word, plant seeds and see what the Lord will do. We know that we are called to be salt and light in the place God has put us, so let’s be faithful to that.

The Spirit’s Sovereignty in Whom He Saves (16:11–40)

The second way we see the sovereign Spirit of missions here is in verses 11–40 and *the Spirit’s sovereignty in whom he saves*.

We see his sovereignty in saving *a business woman* named Lydia (vv. 11–15). It was Paul’s custom **on the Sabbath day** to go to the local synagogue, but since there was not one in Philippi we read that **we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together** (v. 13), including **a woman named Lydia** (v. 14). She was a **seller of purple goods and a worshiper of God** (v. 14), meaning, a Gentile who was attracted to the God of Israel (v. 14). And ***the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul*** (v. 14) and she **and her household** were baptized (v. 15). Note theologically that it was the Lord who opened her heart first so that she could receive. In

other words, she was regenerated so that she could exercise faith. Practically we need to pray for God to open the eyes of our unbelieving family and friends.

We his sovereignty in saving *an exploited slave girl* (vv. 15–18). God loves the despised and weak of this world! It was **as they were going to the place of prayer** that **they were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling** (v. 16). That phrase **a spirit of divination** is literally a “python spirit.” There was an ancient myth that at the temple of Apollo there was a snake who guarded it and who prophesied to the worshippers who came to it. In other words, she is possessed by a demon. And note how theologically correct this demon was: **“These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation”** (v. 17). And we read that **she kept doing for many days**, which led to **Paul** becoming **greatly annoyed** and saying in return, **“I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.”** **And it came out that very hour** (v. 18).

But this led to more persecution of Paul and his friends. This girl’s **owners saw that their hope of gain was gone** and so **they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers** (v. 19). The text literally says because the spirit went out of her that their means of gain went out of them! So there is a false charge in verses 20–21 and a beating in verse 22. But it also led to another account of the sovereign Spirit of missions as we his sovereignty in saving *a Roman jailer* (vv. 19–40). Paul and Silas are thrown into prison (v. 23). In fact, they were put into solitary confinement in maximum security as verse 24 says. All for an exorcism!

It's what we read next that is so fascinating. They were **singing** and **the prisoners were listening** (v. 25) when **suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened** (v. 26). The jailer, who was most likely a former Roman soldier, was about to commit suicide because in Roman law a jailer who lost his prisoners was sentenced to death (v. 27). Yet he hears a voice: "**Do not harm yourself, for we are all here**" (v. 28). Then he says those famous words, "**Sirs, what must I do to be saved?**" (v. 30) Paul and Silas say, "**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household**" (v. 31). Then they catechized his entire family and they were all baptized (vv. 32-33). Now note one little detail in verse 34. We read that **he** (singular) and **his entire household** (plural) **rejoiced** but then we've told why: **that he had believed** (singular) **in God**. This is one of those texts our Baptist friends turn to and say only believers were baptized, but in fact, we're told that only the jailer believed, while his family was instructed, but that they all were baptized.

Conclusion

What a story! What a Spirit who is so sovereign!