

Acts 16: 6-10 “What to do when the Lord’s signals seem unclear”

“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.”

Don’t let the strange place-names in this passage turn you off.

Info in this text can help you make decisions.

Choose right in vital matters.

In the crunch moments that come to all of us.

What guides you at those critical times?

People of all age groups repeatedly state:

“If I had only known.”

Would knowing the future give us an edge?

A few years ago I shared a news story about a fortune-tellers’ convention in Denver.

During their meeting, someone stole all of their crystal-balls.

A reporter asked one of them:

“Didn’t any of you foresee this theft?”

The reply: “We knew something was going to happen, but we didn’t know what.”

A pleasant, attractive young couple began attending the Hollywood church in the 1980s.

She sang in a successful group; one of the most popular in Europe at the time.

At our Bible study, the couple confessed they had recently consulted a fortune teller.

When they told this psychic they had begun attending Bible study, the fortune teller warned the couple: “God and we (fortune tellers) are not on the same side.”

This couple was formerly concerned about making it big in Hollywood, not with God.

Today’s text does not relate to success in fame, finances, or influence.

It will not assist us to attain selfish ends or to further personal ambitions.

It relates to getting God’s guidance in matters of doing His will.

As you know, God wants us fulfill our obligations such as parenting and achieving in God’s kingdom.

This brief Bible passage helps us make correct choices at key moments.

The great New York Yankee catcher, Yogi Berra once joked, **“When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”**

I drove a mountain road in Oregon near a major highway junction shortly after a serious automobile crash occurred there.

Two curious facts got my attention.

A) This accident affected only one car.

As far I could see, it involved no other vehicle.

B) Here’s the second memorable fact about that accident.

At the junction, the driver didn’t take either well-marked route.

He/she crashed the sign in the middle.



Did indecision about which route to take numb the driver’s mind till it was too late?

You possibly know folks so stymied by indecision they wind up doing zilch.

Sometimes people do that—do nothing.

That’s what that sign-crasher apparently did.

Do mixed signals bewilder you at times?

You don’t know which way to turn.

Let me share an updated version of an old story about decision-making.

A Notre Dame graduate, named Morris always had trouble making the right decision.

Morris continually chose the wrong traffic lane or the wrong horse at the race track.

After graduation decades back, Morris looked at two career options.

A large savings and loan operation offered him a job or he could go with a new company with the funny name of Apple.

No sooner had he signed with the savings and loan than the big S & L crash occurred.

Apple's success is legendary.

A friend told the young Catholic of two other opportunities: Boeing Aircraft or a thriving investment group called Enron.

This time he went with the unusual name, Enron, and you know what happened.

A friend told him of third opportunity in California if he could get there right away.

The friend arranged for him to fly to Cali in a private jet.

Halfway to Cali, the plane engine failed.

The pilot told the fellow not to worry, two parachutes were aboard; pick one, put it on, jump out, and pull the cord.

He followed the pilot's instructions, but when he pulled the cord, nothing happened.

As he plummeted to the ground, he could see the other chute saving the pilot.

Being a good Catholic, Morris pleaded in prayer: "St. Francis, help me!"

Suddenly a voice boomed out of a nearby cloud. "I can save you my son, if in fact you called me. Were you calling St. Francis Xavier or St. Francis of Assisi?"

The Apostle Paul received no answers except "no."

Years before Paul shared Jesus' good news in in south-central Turkey.

He and coworker Barnabas brought many people to Jesus in the region and established churches in several cities.

Other co-workers accompanied Paul on a second trip to the same area.

After they visited the established churches in Phrygia and Galatia Paul and his companions planned to go directly west to Asia Minor.

By some means, the Holy Spirit ordered: "Do not go to Asia."

Paul and his missionary companions apparently preached in other area cities.

Once they finished those visits, they thought they would travel farther north in Turkey.

When they reached an area known as Mysia, they contemplated going farther north toward Bithynia, which borders the Black Sea.

“But the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them.”
God continually closed doors on them.

Have you had those times when you tried to do things right, but kept getting rebuffed?
When that happens, what should we do?

Paul didn’t throw up his hands and quit.
He kept going.

In other words, when God’s will seems unclear, we proceed prayerfully.

We keep doing what the Lord assigned us.

When the Lord forbade them to go straight west from south central Turkey, Paul and the group turned north toward Bithynia.

As they travelled in that direction, however, the Lord told them not to go to Bithynia.

“So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.”

The missionaries again went west, now, from north-central Turkey and came to a town called Troas on the west coast.

“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.”

Map shows the cities Paul and Barnabas visited on the first journey (red line).



From *Baker's Bible Atlas*, Charles B. Pfeiffer, Baker Book House, 1961

The green line shows approximate route of the second journey.

Asia is center right (yellow).

Troas is port city in northwest Asia.

Bithynia, (purple) at the southwest corner of the Black Sea (upper right).

Macedonia (pink) across the Aegean Sea to the west; well-known cities included Philippi and Thessalonica.

Achaia is south of Macedonia (light green) with chief cities Corinth and Athens.

On his return to Caesarea and Jerusalem, Paul eventually got to Ephesus in Asia.

Why did the Holy Spirit forbid Paul to visit Asia immediately?

Only the Lord knows, but it’s probable that conditions were not yet right for Paul’s visit.

History gives us a clue to why the Spirit of Jesus forbade Paul to enter Bithynia.

Pliny the Younger who lived about 62-113 AD was a consul (chief magistrate) for the Roman Emperor (98-117) Trajan.

Pliny reported to Emperor Trajan the influence and numbers of Christians in Bithynia.

Someone other than the Apostle Paul did great mission work in the Black Sea area.

You might like to read what Pliny reported to the Emperor about Bithynian Christians:

“Before it was light . . . they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to some god, binding themselves by a solemn oath, not for the purposes of any wicked design, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to eat a meal- but a meal of a common and innocent kind.”¹

The Lord apparently did not need Paul in Bithynia.

He used someone else’s gifts there.

Let’s return to the emphasis in our text.

God wants His Word known to the ends of the earth.

¹ *The Epistles of Pliny, Volume III*, Letter XCVI (page 166) translated by William Melmoth, the Bibliophile Society, Boston, MDCDXXV Pliny governed Bithynia circa 111-113 AD.

God gave Paul numerous gifts, but He gave others great gifts, too.

Paul also did not know the big picture. No human being does; only God knows. God expects us all to submit daily to his will and share our joy in Christ.

Some of us wish to ascend high on the success ladder.

We look for recognition, respect, and esteem in the eyes of others.

Norma and I enjoy feeding and watching colorful birds e.g. Baltimore orioles, gold finches, and red headed woodpeckers.

When I'm on the ladder to fill the feeders, our \$50 farm dog Josie, wants to help. **She tries to climb the ladder beside me.**

Josie does many tricks: catches Frisbees, jumps through hoops, and leaps high to catches balls, but Josie can't climb ladders.

Dogs easily run up and down steep hills; few climb ladders.

God didn't design dogs to stand or walk far on their back legs.



Josie leaping



A cousin on hind legs uncertainly

Neither did God design human beings to exalt themselves above others.

We rise above others no better than canines walk on hind legs.

God gives us differing gifts, but our gifts are meant to glorify Him through Christ.

Consider this benediction Paul later wrote to the church in Ephesus, Asia Minor:

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”²

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We glorify God.

We submit to Him.

Out of reverence for Christ, we submit to others.

When we properly submit, God will in time lift us up for his glory.

God bless us as we search the Scriptures to find God’s will.

We pray for the Spirit’s guidance and wisdom from His Word.

We submit to Christ for God’s glory trusting and patiently waiting in love.

² Ephesians 3:20, 21 NIV