

How to Handle Life's Interruptions

Session 6

November 23, 2025

When Doing God's Work Is Interrupted

The Point: God may interrupt us to move our ministry in a new direction.

Session Passage: Acts 16:4-15

Acts 16:4-5

Connection to the Point. God was working through Paul and his missionary partners to evangelize and strengthen the churches.

Context. In Acts 13, the Holy Spirit singled out Barnabas and Paul (called Saul at the time) for an evangelistic journey. On this missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas established churches in the southern portion of the Roman province of Galatia in what is modern-day Turkey (Acts 13:1–14:28). Upon returning to Antioch of Syria, Paul and Barnabas found themselves engaged in a controversy that eventually had to be resolved by the Jerusalem church (chap. 15). Arising out of a conference of the apostles, elders, and believers in Jerusalem, a decision was reached that Gentile Christians would not be required to be circumcised. Rather Gentile believers were to abstain from eating blood or anything strangled or sacrificed to an idol. In addition, they were to practice moral purity. Letters were written explaining the decision of the Jerusalem council.

After a divisive parting from Barnabas (15:36-39), Paul and his new partner, Silas, returned to the churches Paul had established on his first missionary journey, carrying the letter from the Jerusalem council (vv. 40-41). When they came to the area of Derbe and Lystra, Paul enlisted a young man named Timothy to accompany them on the journey (16:1-3). Timothy's Jewish mother, Eunice, was a believer (16:1; see 2 Tim. 1:5). Timothy's father, on the other hand, was Greek (Acts 16:1). Rabbinical teaching stated that a child born to a Gentile father and a Jewish mother was considered Jewish.

Paul's pattern of ministry in every new city he entered was to locate the Jewish synagogue and begin proclaiming Jesus Christ there. He realized that for one of his traveling companions to be considered Jewish but to be uncircumcised would have been a barrier to the gospel. Paul was not circumcising a Gentile when he circumcised Timothy (16:3). Paul had fought long and hard against such a practice. This was simply an effort to remove any hindrance that the gospel might face.

The decisions (v. 4) were not optional suggestions from the Jerusalem council but decisions that carried the authority of the apostles and elders from the Jerusalem church. These *decisions* (decrees, judgments) addressed the issue of the Gentiles and salvation. The primary point of the decisions was that salvation is by grace alone through faith in Jesus. There are no works or human efforts required. A controversy had arisen at the church of Antioch in Syria. Some men purporting to be from the apostle James, the half-brother of Jesus, had come to Antioch and insisted that Gentiles were required to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses to be saved (Acts 15:1-2; see Gal. 2:11-14). After a lengthy discussion and testimony from Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and words of wisdom from James the brother of

Jesus, the decisions were reached by the entire assembly of apostles, elders, and believers that nothing should be added to receiving the gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone (Acts 15:4-29). After the issue of salvation was settled, the church also tackled the issue of fellowship. Many Jewish Christians were still following the Mosaic law. They would have run the risk of being ceremonially defiled by associating with the Gentile Christians. Because of this, the Jerusalem council requested that the Gentile Christians abstain from four things that would allow Jewish Christians to fellowship with them: eating anything sacrificed to a pagan idol, consuming animal blood, or anything that had been strangled, and they were to avoid sexual immorality (vv. 20-21).

Strengthened in the faith (v. 5). One of the primary purposes of Paul and Silas in visiting these newly established churches was to encourage and strengthen the believers in their faith. These relatively new churches had been left without the guidance of mature believers once Paul and Barnabas had returned to Antioch at the end of the first missionary journey. Furthermore, they would have had limited written Christian documents (the book of Galatians might have been written to them before the start of the second missionary journey, which was undertaken about AD 49–52). These churches would have been led by elders appointed by Paul and Barnabas at the close of the first missionary journey (Acts 14:23), but these leaders would have been relatively new Christians as well. It was truly a work of the Holy Spirit for these churches to survive during the early years. With the visit of Paul and Silas, these churches were *strengthened in the faith*. As a result of this strengthening, the believers in these churches “grew daily in numbers” (16:5)

Acts 16:6-10

Connection to the Point. The Holy Spirit prevented Paul from continuing his missionary work in Asia.

Geography. All the activity in the first part of Paul’s second missionary journey took place in what was known as Asia Minor (the portion of modern-day Turkey that is on the continent of Asia). Asia Minor was divided into several Roman provinces including Asia, Bithynia, Pontus, Galatia, Cilicia, Pamphylia, Lycaonia, Lydia, Phrygia, and Mysia. Luke indicated that after Paul visited the churches established during his first journey, he, Silas, and Timothy traveled through the region of Phrygia and Galatia (Acts 16:6). Phrygia was located to the north and west of Antioch of Pisidia, a town where a church had been previously established (13:14-52). Leaving Antioch, Paul wanted to spread the gospel message westward into the province of Asia, but the Holy Spirit would not allow this (16:6). Turning north, Paul and his companions sought to go into the province of Bithynia. (Bithynia and Pontus are on the coast of the Black Sea.) Again, their plans were divinely changed (v. 7). Turning west, they passed by the province of Mysia and made their way to the port city of Troas (v. 8), located on the Aegean Sea. Troas, located near the ancient city of Troy, was an important city where commerce flowed from Asia into the Roman province of Macedonia. To the north and west of Troas, across the Aegean Sea lay the European continent. God’s direction to Paul and his companions would cause them to take the gospel to Europe through Macedonia. Ancient Macedonia covered parts of modern-day northern Greece, Albania, and the Republic of Macedonia.

Forbidden . . . to speak the word (v. 6). God’s direction for Paul’s journey initially came through prohibitions. How the Holy Spirit spoke to Paul is not explained. It may have been by direct revelation or perhaps through a prophet in one of the churches they visited (for an example see 21:10-11). The method in which the Holy Spirit spoke to Paul is not as important as the fact that Paul obeyed and changed his plans. Obviously, God had a larger plan for the spreading of the gospel. God’s timetable was different than Paul’s. While Paul would spend extensive time in the province of Asia on his third missionary journey which occurred in about AD 53–57 (Acts 18:23–21:16; in Asia Minor, 19:1–20:1), much of the evangelization of this region would be facilitated by other believers such as Epaphras (Col. 1:7-8).

The Spirit of Jesus (v. 7) is the same Holy Spirit who prohibited the missionaries from entering the province of Asia (v. 6). In this instance, why did Luke use this phrase, *the Spirit of Jesus*? Perhaps the prohibitions came in different forms—one by a prophet that spoke in one of the churches along the way, and the other command arising from a direct revelation from risen Christ. After all, Paul had received a direct revelation from Jesus at the time of his conversion on the road to Damascus (9:1-6). Other verses identify the Holy Spirit with Jesus Christ (see Rom. 8:9; Gal. 4:6; Phil. 1:19; 1 Pet. 1:11). As one writer notes, divine leading is a major theme in this passage, “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.”¹ Taking the gospel onto the continent of Europe was undoubtedly an extremely important move for the spreading of the message of salvation in Jesus Christ into the wider world.

Paul had a vision (v. 9). The Greek word for *vision* means “that which is seen” and refers to a revelation of some sort. There is generally a slight difference between *visions* and *dreams* in the Old and New Testaments, although sometimes the terms appear to mean the same thing. The difference lay in the fact that dreams occurred during sleep while most often visions occurred when the recipient was awake. In Acts 11:5, Peter described being in a trance when he received a vision. Paul wrote of his uncertainty when he received a vision whether “he was in the body or out of the body” (2 Cor. 12:2). No set pattern is found for the giving of visions. Throughout Scripture, God used both visions and dreams to reveal His will or insight into future events. Sometimes interpreters were required to explain visions (Dan. 7:15-16).

A Macedonian man (v. 9). Much speculation exists as to the identity of this man in Paul’s vision. However, the identity of this person is not as important as his plea for help: “Cross over to Macedonia and help us!” This was a divine invitation from God for Paul to extend his ministry onto the European continent. The prohibitions Paul and his companions had experienced previously now turned into a positive directive to proceed.

Acts 16:11-15

Connection to the Point. God continued to work through Paul as he went to Philippi.

Geography. These verses chronicle the leap of the gospel into Europe as the message of Jesus Christ spread through the Roman Empire toward its capital, the city of Rome. The missionaries set sail across the Aegean Sea that separated Asia Minor from Greece to the west and Macedonia to the northwest. They came first to the island of Samothrace, some sixty-five miles from Neapolis on the coast of Europe.

The next day the group arrived at Neapolis (v. 11), the seaport for the city of Philippi. Philippi was located some thirteen miles inland.

Philippi was, according to Luke, “a Roman colony and a leading city of the district of Macedonia” (v. 12). While Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, Philippi was a large and influential city. It was named by Philip II of Macedon for himself. Philip (382–336 BC) was the father of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC). Philippi was also designated as a Roman colony with many Roman soldiers having settled there following some major battles in the area. One such battle in 42 BC saw the forces of Octavian Caesar, Mark Antony, and Marcus Lepidus, rulers of the Roman Republic, defeat the forces of Marcus Brutus and Gaius Cassius, the leaders of the assassins of Julius Caesar.

We (v. 11). Acts 16:10-11 is the first of the four “we” passages in the book of Acts (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-8; 27:1–28:16). They are an indication by Luke, the writer of Acts, that during the times detailed in these passages he had joined Paul and the other missionaries. In this instance, Luke had evidently joined Paul, Silas, and Timothy as they traveled from Troas to Macedonia. Little is known about Luke, other than was a physician (Col. 4:14), a frequent travel companion of Paul, and a Gentile. The early church fathers Jerome and Eusebius indicated that Luke was originally from Antioch of Syria.

A place of prayer (v. 13). Paul’s custom was to first preach at the city’s Jewish synagogue on the first Sabbath after arriving in the city. Ten Jewish men were required for the establishment of a synagogue. That there was no synagogue in the city suggests there was not a sizable enough Jewish population in Philippi to constitute a synagogue. Therefore, Paul located a meeting place outside the city along an unnamed river where people met together to observe Sabbath prayer.

God-fearing woman (v. 14). In first-century Judaism, there were two descriptions given to Gentiles who participated in the worship of the God of Abraham. First, there were those who became “Jewish proselytes.” These were people who embraced the Jewish faith and fulfilled all the requirements to become Jews. The other descriptive term was that of a “God-fearer.” This was someone attracted to the Jewish worship of God who might participate in much of the synagogue worship, but without taking all the necessary steps to become a Jewish proselyte. Cornelius, the devout and God-fearing Roman centurion, may have been a God-fearer (10:1-2). Often in the synagogues where Paul preached, there would be God-fearers in the audience. (See 13:16 as an example.)

Thyatira (v. 14) was an important economic center in Asia Minor in the Lycus River Valley. Later, this city contained one of the seven churches located in Asia Minor addressed in the book of Revelation (Rev. 2:18-29). The city was a large center for trading wool and woolen goods, and had a strong industry in producing and selling dyes. Lydia was “a dealer in purple cloth,” having established a business in Thyatira. As a result, she was likely a person of some wealth.

The Lord opened her heart (v. 14). As a God-fearer, Lydia was seeking a relationship with God. When Paul began speaking about God’s revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ, she readily responded in faith. God through His Spirit opened Lydia’s heart to respond to the call of the gospel. There is no coming to faith in Christ unless God’s Spirit draws a person to Himself (John 6:44). Lydia and those in her

household responded in faith and were baptized. Luke does not indicate the makeup of Lydia's household, which in addition to her immediate family may have included distant relations, business associates, friends, and/or slaves.

Stay at my house (v. 15). As a new believer, Lydia opened her house to Paul and his companions. Not only did they reside there during their time in Philippi, Lydia's home also became a meeting place for the believers in Philippi (v. 40).

1. John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 345.