

# Acts 16:1-15: Has God Ever Said to You, “No, Go This Way!”?

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## I. Introduction

Have you ever felt God nudging you in the other direction? It’s incredible how often God says to us, “You need to stop and go the other way!” Why don’t we listen to His voice when He’s trying so desperately to get our attention, to save us from our next mistake or to save us from the ongoing mistake we’re in the middle of? Because our circumstances and Satan’s voice are louder.

## II. Acts 16:1-15: When God Says, “No, this way!” He’s Trying to Save You a lot of Heartache

**16:1-3**, having strengthened the churches in Syria and Cilicia, Paul and Silas go to Derbe and Lystra, which was the hometown of Timothy. He was a disciple of Christ who had a Jewish mother and Gentile father and had a great reputation among the Christians in Lystra and Iconium, which is why Paul wanted him on his team (in a sense, he would serve the role of John Mark who was the attendant to Paul and Barnabas—whose role was now being filled by Silas). Since Lystra was one of the places Paul visited during his First Missionary Journey, Timothy was likely brought to faith by Paul himself (1 Timothy 1:2). He will become one of Paul’s closest companions and is mentioned more than any other companion in his epistles, in fact, Paul’s last letter before his death is written to him (2 Timothy). His Jewish mother and grandmother also came to faith in Christ likely during the First Missionary Journey (2 Timothy 1:5). They raised Timothy in God’s Holy Scriptures from a very young age (2 Timothy 3:15). He was a perfect candidate to serve as Paul’s attendant and it appears that the elders of Lystra and Paul himself laid hands on him at God’s direction commissioning him to this position (1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6).

But there was a problem: he was uncircumcised. His father, like all Greeks, would’ve been against circumcision, in fact, during the Intertestamental Period, the Greeks who controlled the land of Israel outlawed circumcision even for Jews. So Paul had him circumcised. Is this hypocrisy or caving in by Paul? Didn’t he argue against this very thing along with the rest of the apostles at the Jerusalem Council that Gentiles didn’t have to be circumcised to be saved? Why would he circumcise Timothy? The answer is in the context. Paul did it because it was public knowledge among the Jewish community that Timothy’s mother was Jewish and that his Greek father refused to circumcise him. Wherever Paul went, it was Paul’s custom to reach out to the Jews first (Acts 13:14; 14:1). So if an uncircumcised Jewish male was with Paul, it would hinder his ministry to the Jews.

But doesn’t this violate the Jerusalem Council? Not in the least. Timothy’s circumcision had NOTHING to do with his salvation; he was already saved, in fact, a strong disciple of Christ, 16:1-2. It had to do with Timothy’s Jewishness and with reaching out to the Jewish community. As a Jewish male, Timothy was obligated by the Abrahamic Covenant—which is an eternal covenant—to get circumcised as a sign of that Covenant. In fact, Paul’s actions here are the principle he lived by, i.e., Paul would do anything—except compromise God’s truth—to save the lost (1 Corinthians 9:19-22—“to the Jews, he [or one of his company] became as a Jew”). Some point to Titus and the fact that Paul didn’t circumcise him as evidence of Paul’s hypocrisy (Galatians 2:1-3). But these are completely different cases. First, Titus was 100% Gentile. Second, the issue with Titus was eternal salvation not evangelism or the Abrahamic Covenant. Paul was not about to circumcise Titus in violation of the principle that Gentiles do not have to be circumcised to be saved.

**16:4-5**, having circumcised Timothy, they begin visiting the previously planted churches and they deliver to them the decrees established by the elders and apostles at the Jerusalem Council: Gentiles do not have to keep the Law or be circumcised in order to be saved (which also shows that Timothy's circumcision had to do with his Jewishness not his salvation), Gentiles should stay away from things strangled or offered to idols, blood, and sexual immorality—not because they had to keep the Law or because it was wrong to eat meat offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8; 1 Tim 4:4-5), but because these things would offend their Jewish brethren and disrupt the unity among these ½ Jewish, ½ Gentile churches. The result of getting this wonderful news was that these churches were strengthened in the faith and kept growing in number daily.

**16:6-10**, they leave Derbe and Lystra and head through Phrygia and Galatia and that's when God prevents them from going to Asia. Later God will allow Paul to go to Asia during the Third Missionary Journey (Acts 19). But He doesn't want him going there now. Next they try to go to Bithynia but the Spirit of the Lord does not permit them to go there either (some translations read "Spirit of Jesus," whether yours has this or not, the Holy Spirit is referred to as such elsewhere: Romans 8:9; Philippians 1:19). With no other direction left to go in, they head to Mysia and come to Troas (Paul will be here at least two more times: Acts 20:6; 2 Corinthians 2:12). That's when God made it crystal clear which way He wanted them to go: God gave Paul a vision of a Macedonian man pleading for Paul to come to Macedonia and help them. Immediately they understood that God wanted them to preach the Gospel in Macedonia. And for the first time in Acts we see Luke, the author, join Paul's team. These are the famous "we" sections in Acts which reveal that Luke was also an eyewitness to some of the events in Acts (see also 20:5)...has God ever told you, "No, not that way, this way!"? Did you hear it? Did you listen?

**16:11-15**, from Troas they sail 85 miles to the island of Samothrace, midway between Troas and Neapolis. Then they sail to Neapolis, Philippi's port city (it's 170 miles from Troas and 10 miles from Philippi). They get to Philippi, a famous city which was known as Crenides until Philip II of Macedon (Alexander the Great's father) conquered it and later renamed it after himself. It was also famous because it was the site of the famous battle between Octavian/Augustus & Mark Antony and Brutus & Cassius who assassinated Julius Caesar. Augustus and Mark Antony won and it ended the Roman Republic and began the Roman Empire in 42 BC. In honor of his victory, Augustus Caesar made Philippi a Roman colony, which made it an extension of the city of Rome, i.e., its people become Roman citizens and share the same laws and rights as Rome. It was settled by Romans, mostly active and retired military. It had a small Jewish population, too small for a synagogue: Jewish custom and law stated that if there weren't enough Jewish males (at least 10), then public/corporate worship would take place in an open area, preferably by a riverside. This is how Paul knew where to go, i.e., he knew that there weren't enough Jews in the area for a synagogue, so he and the others head for the river to find those gathered there. They find a group of women holding a prayer meeting. And they begin to have a discussion with them about Christ.

Among them was Lydia a wealthy businesswoman who sold purple fabrics and was originally from Thyatira which was famous for its dyeing facilities and the center of the purple cloth trade. Her purple fabric was in high demand since it was the official toga in Rome and the Roman colonies. She was a worshipper of God meaning that she was likely a Gentile convert to Judaism, either a proselyte or God-fearer. Though they all took turns persuading the women about Christ and His salvation, Paul was the main speaker and the Lord open her heart to receive Paul's words and she believed. Then she and her household were baptized (which may refer to female relatives or maidservants that worked for her and were at this prayer meeting with her). Afterward, Lydia would not give up until Paul and his companions agreed to lodge in her house and make her home their base of operation while in Philippi. What direction is God telling Lydia to go...how about you?



### III. Conclusion

Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them.

<sup>1</sup> Wright, T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 13-28* (p. 57-58). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.