

“COME OVER TO MACEDONIA AND HELP US”

Acts 15:36–16:10

Key Verse: 16:9

“And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’”

Have you ever been unsure of where you should be, or who should be your focus? Not just at school, work or home, but in ministry? There are so many options, so many needs in the world. How can we possibly share Jesus? Where should we serve? Who should be our focus? Today’s passage is a bridge to a new section in Acts (16:11–18:22). In it, we see how Paul and Barnabas separate (15:36–39), how a new missionary team is formed and used (15:40–16:5), and how God leads the team to a new mission field (16:6–10). Despite the various challenges, God is in control, doing something. We especially want to reflect on Paul’s vision of a man of Macedonia. A vision? What’s this vision saying to us? And how does the team respond? May God speak to us through his word.

In chapters 13–14 God has already done great things through Paul and Barnabas in Cyprus and Galatia. In chapter 15 God graciously resolved the circumcision issue in Jerusalem. Now they can move forward. Look at 15:36. Paul initiates this discussion. He wants to “return and visit the brothers.” “Visit” literally means “go see about” them. In shepherding, visiting is crucial. Without visiting, we can’t really know, pray for, or help people. Paul wants to “see how they are,” or, “how they are holding up”— how they’re doing spiritually. Are they growing in faith, following Jesus our Lord? A shepherd’s job is to protect sheep from the devil, so that “not one of them would be lost” (1 Pet.5:8; John 18:9).

Then we see the disagreement. Look at verses 37–38. At first they share their opinions on who to take as their helper. Barnabas, the senior partner, wants to take John Mark again. But Paul disagrees, maybe because John Mark’s leaving was hardest on him, especially after he got stoned. The word “withdraw”

can mean “fall away,” “abandon,” or “desert.”¹ Paul and Barnabas get into a “sharp disagreement” over John Mark (39a).² Luke doesn’t hide it. But he’s not trying to say who’s right. So why mention it here? Luke is showing us that each servant of God has something in his heart. Paul wants to protect the Gentile churches from division and legalism and get on with the task of reaching new people. Barnabas wants to build up one person who had failed, John Mark.³ It’s God who put these burdens in his servants’ hearts. And now God seems to be leading each of them differently. Sometimes we assume we know what’s best, such as keeping the team together. But God may have other plans.

After Barnabas leaves, Paul selects Silas, a younger, respected Jerusalem church leader, whom God has recently used to encourage and strengthen the Gentile brothers in Antioch (15:22,32). As a younger man, Silas has the energy to endure the demands of missionary work. As a Jew, he’ll be effective in witnessing to Jews on the mission field. As a prophet, he’ll continue to encourage and strengthen new Gentile believers. As a Roman citizen like Paul is (16:37–38), Silas will be useful in traveling around the Roman Empire. After the journey, Silas will be a credible witness in Jerusalem to the work of the gospel and the Holy Spirit on the mission field through Paul.⁴ Choosing Silas shows Paul’s two concerns: strengthening new Gentile believers, and building unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians. In spreading the gospel, we too need thoughtful discernment to select the right members for a ministry team.

The location is Syrian Antioch (15:35; map), where Paul was first sent out as a missionary. After Barnabas takes Mark and sails away to Cyprus (15:39b), Paul and Silas depart, and the Antioch church members commend them “to the grace of the Lord” as a new missionary team (15:40). To spread the good news today, we too need “the grace of the Lord” most of all. Look at 15:41 (map). Before going straight to Galatia as initially planned (15:36), Paul and Silas first go through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.⁵ No doubt, on this journey

¹ Despite his good intentions, Peter did the same thing when Jesus was arrested (Matt.26:33–34; Mark 14:27–30; Luke 22:31–34; John 13:36–38; 18:25–27).

² Later on, Paul writes of Barnabas as his colleague (1 Cor.9:6), and describes John Mark as “very useful to [him] for ministry” (2 Tim.4:11). So this separation did not mean their relationships were broken.

³ In fact, most likely with Peter’s help (1 Pet.5:13), Mark goes on to write Mark’s Gospel.

⁴ 18:22 tells us that after this journey Paul “went up and greeted the church” to report on his ministry, then went to Antioch. Most scholars interpret the expression “went up” to mean “to Jerusalem.”

⁵ In fact, the Jerusalem church’s letter begins by addressing these Gentile churches in Syria and Cilicia (15:23b). But Acts hasn’t told us how these churches got started. It’s in Galatians where Paul mentions

Paul is hoping to go to new places and reach new people. But God has also made him a good shepherd who doesn't neglect any Gentiles he's led to Christ.

Look at 16:1a (map). From the region of Cilicia on the coast, this time Paul is traveling by land, through a gap in the Taurus Mountains, up to the central plateau. Derbe is a remote town where Paul made many disciples right after he was nearly stoned to death (14:20–21). Lystra, where Paul was stoned, is 75 miles away. Look at 16:1b. There Paul meets a young disciple named Timothy, who likely was converted through Paul's ministry. Timothy's mother is Jewish, but his father was a Greek. To Paul, Timothy's mixed race may be ideal in spreading the gospel. He could be a promising young spiritual leader. But who is Timothy, really? He's known at both Lystra and Iconium, just 20 miles away. The brothers there have seen his practical life and speak well of him (16:2). The discerning opinions of our brothers and sisters in Christ still really matter.

So Paul asks Timothy to join him on this journey, and he circumcises him (16:3). Paul was just at the Jerusalem Council, where it was decided *not* to circumcise Gentile believers. So why circumcise Timothy? Hearing the Council's deliberations, having Silas from Jerusalem with him now, and repeatedly sharing the Council's letter, Paul is keenly aware of Jewish sensitivities. To Jews on the mission field, Timothy, being half-Jewish and *uncircumcised*, could be regarded as Jewish ethnically, but an apostate religiously.⁶ Jews might question Paul for taking Timothy as his partner. Does Paul now disregard Jewish identity and want Jews who believe in Jesus to abandon their Jewishness? No Paul the missionary is out to become all things to all people (1 Cor.9:19–23). Circumcising Timothy is not necessary for his salvation, but it's a practical step to remove a possible distraction in bringing the gospel to Jews. Remembering what John Mark did, Paul also might be testing to see how committed Timothy is. He doesn't refuse even this. Timothy grows not only as a helper or fellow worker, but as Paul's "beloved and faithful child in the Lord," genuinely concerned for people, a gifted pastor, Bible teacher, evangelist, soldier, and sharer in suffering for the gospel.⁷

how he had begun that work by himself, 14 years ago, not long after his conversion (Acts 9:30; cf. Gal.1:21; 2:1a). Now, on his way back to Galatia (15:36), Paul first wants to encourage and strengthen the Gentile brothers in Syria and Cilicia.

⁶ Paul refused to have Titus, who was fully Gentile and another young pastor, circumcised, as a matter of principle (Gal.2:1–3).

⁷ See Acts 19:22; Rom.16:21a; 1 Thess.3:2; 1 Cor.4:17; 1 Tim.1:2; 2 Tim.1:2; Phil.2:19–22; 2 Tim.1:6–7; 2:3; 3:14–4:5.

Paul, Silas and Timothy have come together in Christ as a strong team to proclaim Jesus to both Jews and Gentiles.⁸ What do they do first? Read 16:4–5. Paul wants to protect these Gentile brothers from the circumcision party, and fully integrate them with Jewish believers. In any time or place, a servant of God’s task is not only to evangelize new people, but to strengthen and protect diverse new Christians, assuring them that they really do belong in the larger Christian community. We should never ignore any genuine new believers who may be feeling left out, unimportant, or like second-class citizens.

So far, Paul has faced a disagreement with Barnabas, and the challenge of the racial and religious barriers between Jewish and Gentile believers. Now he experiences pushback in another way. Look at verses 6–8. The Holy Spirit keeps the team from going to the provinces of Asia, Bithynia, and Mysia (map). No doubt Paul had been trying to go to these places on account of their proximity to the churches in Galatia already begun. Later, these provinces eventually do have Christian communities in their major cities.⁹ But for now the Spirit leads the team away from these areas. Not anyone’s idea, they randomly end up in a coastal town called Troas. We have very little information about this part of their journey. We’re not sure how they could discern that it was the Holy Spirit preventing them from going places. We just see the words “forbidden,” “attempted,” and “not allowed.” Whatever is happening, Paul has ideas what to do, but the Holy Spirit is leading differently. It tells us that God knows best, even better than Paul! When God closes certain doors, he opens an unexpected one. Sometimes God takes us through a similar journey, to help us truly listen to him and depend on him.

Now, after wandering for probably several months, something unusual happens. Look at verse 9. In the night, this is a vivid vision. It’s a man from Macedonia. Perhaps his appearance, clothing, or accent indicate his ethnicity. In the vision he’s standing, urging (begging), and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” “Come over” is literally “cross over” (map). The distance from Troas to Macedonia is short, but it’s actually where two continents, Asia and Europe, meet. To us, it may seem like no big deal. But to this team, going to Macedonia is a whole new world. It seems it never occurred to Paul to go there. But this is

⁸ See 1 Thess.1:1a; 2 Thess.1:1a; 2 Cor.1:19 (Silvanus is the longer version of Silas).

⁹ See 1 Pet.1:1–2; Rev.1:4a; 2:1,8,12,18; 3:1,7,14. Later, God does allow Paul to work in Ephesus for three years, and God’s word spreads to the whole province of Asia (Acts 19:1–10). But not this time.

where the Holy Spirit is leading. And this vision is not just a sign or secret code. The Macedonian man begging for help is heart-moving.

Our English word “help” is rather sedate. But here, “help” is literally, “*Run, because I’m crying!*”¹⁰ Men aren’t usually crying. What’s going on? The man in the vision is *suffering*—not physically, financially or humanly, but *spiritually*. What does this mean? Without God, all people are living in sin. Sin isn’t a concept; it’s a real power that invisibly gnaws at our souls. We may seem fine, but sin gradually makes us arrogant and enslaved, indifferent and cruel. Then sin fills us with guilt, fear, and meaninglessness. Sin leaves us sick with despair, no truth, no direction, and no hope. Sin crushes and deadens our hearts. Sin causes so much pain, anxiety, and so many broken relationships. People suffering in sin turn to substance abuse or wild living to escape the pain. But the sin is still there, causing all kinds of misery. The Macedonian man is a vivid depiction of a human soul crying out under sin’s torment. And what’s the solution to his misery? Only the gospel of Jesus. The good news of Jesus brings peace, forgiveness, healing, restoration, joy, and direction. Our Savior Jesus can restore even the most damaged person into an intimate, beautiful relationship with our Father God.

This passage shows what we need for ministry. We need to know Jesus. We need to be on a proven team. We need to prepare to cross cultures, adapt to new kinds of people, and depend on the Spirit’s guidance. We need to be ready to suffer anything, pay any cost. And crucially, we need missionary vision. We need to hear the cries of the souls of real people who’ve never received the gospel, dying in the torment of sin. God needs to get through not just to our minds but to our hearts, to hear someone crying in the night. It’s not about us; it’s about all the people dying without the good news of Jesus. Do we care? Through a heavenly vision from the Holy Spirit, God wants to give us such a heart.

Patrick of Ireland was actually English. At the age of 16 he was enslaved by pirates and worked as a shepherd of sheep in Ireland for six years, where he said he grew in faith and personal prayer. After escaping back to England he had a dream. The people of Ireland, living without the gospel, were calling to him. So he studied Christianity more deeply and went back as a missionary, to bring Jesus to the people of Ireland. Hudson Taylor experienced a similar calling to

¹⁰ The Greek word *boetheo* literally means, “after hearing a cry, run” (*The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*).

bring the good news of Jesus to the people in the interior of China who'd never heard it before. The Scottish missionary David Livingstone had a call from God to explore the interior of Africa and evangelize the people there. The English shoemaker William Carey felt a strong conviction of God calling him to the unreached people of India. Adoniram Judson heard God's call to go with his wife to reach people in Burma. Sarah Barry was called as a single missionary to Korea after the Korean War. She later teamed up with Samuel Lee, a youth pastor in Gwangju, to begin student ministry. Fifteen years later they came to Chicago, and through their vision to raise spiritual leaders, our ministry is now all over the world. In each case, someone heard God's call to go to a specific people. Through that person's obedience and dedication, history changed. God's call to a specific place and people is always based on the Holy Spirit's leading. Jeff Iorg's book *Is God Calling Me?* tells us God's call is a powerful, profound, deeply personal experience, confirmed by other servants in our lives. God also moves us by the heart-breaking spiritual needs of the people he wants us to serve. Here in the U.S., are we hiding in our own bubble? Or are our hearts broken by the lostness of the world around us? We may not be called overseas, but as Jesus' followers we are called to care and to pray. God wants us wherever we are to open our eyes to his vision for those around us who need Jesus.

So what happens? Read verse 10. The word "we" shows that this is where the author Luke joins them. They've been wondering where God is leading. Through Paul's vision, they all "conclude." "Conclude" literally means they unite in an agreed decision. This, too, is the work of the Holy Spirit. They immediately seek to go to Macedonia. We don't always understand God's ways or how he's leading. But following him is always best in the long run. He's calling us all to act.

May God help us to form teams wisely that work together in sharing Jesus. When it seems like he is closing doors, may God help us to trust that he's still leading. Let's read verse 9 again. Most of all, may God move our hearts with his vision for the lost people he wants us to reach, and help us agree in faith to go and share Jesus with them.