

FOLLOWING THE LORD'S LEAD

Acts 15:36-16:5

There's a prayer I pray routinely—almost daily, and if not daily, is the attitude of my heart—that says, “*Lord, please continue lead me and guide me today.*” When I'm praying for the church, I'm praying, “*Lord, please continue to lead and guide Your church. Make it clear that it's not just me or the church board or worship team leading it. You lead it.*” Why pray that? Because part of the Christian experience is learning to follow to the Lord's lead. We are Christ-followers. Christ followers understand that God has a will and it is good and it is wise and we want to walk in it. That's something of what we're going to talk about today as we resume our journey through book of Acts, this book that it teaching us many things, one of which is that the gospel advances as He leads us and guides us. We'll look at 5 principles for following His lead.

But before we dive in, I want to briefly rewind and remind us of the purpose of the book and what has transpired since it's been a while and some are new or just joining us. Remember Acts is basically the second volume of Luke. Luke is volume 1 and Acts is volume 2. In fact, in the early church days Luke and Acts would circulate among the churches together as a set. This reminds us that Luke and Acts are carrying a **central theme, or purpose**. Last week we talked about how Matthew's gospel was written to a Jewish audience, but Luke's gospel is written for a Gentile audience,ⁱ giving a thorough and accurate, chronological record of the events that explain how the Gentiles came to be included in the Jewish hope of the Messiah (Luke 1:1-4).

I think a worthy theme title could be **Light to the Gentiles** (Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 28:26-28) but remember the NT news is not that Gentiles could be saved, but that Gentiles could be saved *without converting to Judaism*—Gentiles and Jews are saved as Gentiles by grace through faith in Christ. However, we're discovering that for the most part, that Israel has and continues to reject her Messiah and is darkened in their unbelief, while Gentiles are typically more receptive the gospel. Remember Bar-Jesus and Sergius Paulus from Acts 13? The Jewish man was blinded in darkness and the Roman proconsul believed. That's a taste of what is going on on a larger scale and explained in Romans 9-11 as Israel's stumbling.

I've been wanting to show you this, but this is also depicted in some medieval art. Several 12th and 13th century images, like the two women statues at Strasbourg Cathedral in France, depict the Church (*Ecclesia*) and Israel (*Synagoga*). *Ecclesia* stands triumphant with a crown and royal garb, staff and chalice representing divine authority. However, *Synagoga* stands with a broken posture, face down, and a veil over her eyes. Her staff is broken, and her Torah is ready to slip from her hands.ⁱⁱ While we wouldn't agree with the anti-Semitic, replacement theology those images taught, it is true and a mystery that a partial hardening has happened to Israel (Rom. 11). However, she hasn't stumbled so as to fall, right? God is



still preserving a remnant of Jewish believers and I believe OT & NT teaches a future restoration of Israel. But in Acts we see this transition taking place.

Also, I remind us of the **outline** for this book in Acts 1:8, *“but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest parts of the earth.”* This is a geographically expanding book, starting in Jerusalem at Pentecost when the Spirit comes and baptizes believers. Peter preaches and 3,000 **Jews** get saved. The Church continues to grow and Samaritans get saved (half Jew/half Gentile) and Gentiles. While Jerusalem remained the mother church, **Syrian Antioch** became the missionary hub church, sending out Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey to Crete and Turkey, where they experienced much opposition and success.

After that, we witnessed the **first church council**. False teachers called Judaizers were trying to blend the Old Covenant Law of Moses with the New Covenant in Christ—trying to force the Gentiles to embrace Judaism before they came to Christ. The debate concluded, reaffirming that both Jew and Gentile are saved by grace through faith in Christ (15:6-11). With that issue resolved, Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch where they spend some time pastoring that flock.

“36 After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.” 37 Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. 38 But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. 39 And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. 40 But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.”

I. THE DECISION TO REVISIT THE CHURCHES. (15:36-40)

So after some time, a few months to a year, Paul gets the itch to check up on the churches that they’d planted on their first missionary journey. *Were the churches still meeting? Were they continuing to thrive despite persecution? Did they deal with the false teaching in response to his letter?*ⁱⁱⁱ He wanted to check on them, to strengthen and disciple them more. That’s a good reminder for us that we’re not just about seeing people get saved, but making disciples.

However, a disagreement occurs between Paul and Barnabas. You can envision how it went. Paul says, *“Let go visit the brethren.”* Barnabas says, *“Great, I’ll go get John-Mark.”* P: *“Mark? Don’t you remember what happened last time? He bailed on us at Perga when things got tough.”* B: *“Yeah but we need him. Let’s give him a second chance. I gave you a second chance, Paul, when no one else would.”* It says, *“Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.”*

First, you know why I like this account? It’s comforting to know that Paul and Barnabas were human too. The early church had problems too. Anywhere you have humans, you have problems.

You have disagreements. I'm glad author Luke didn't airbrush the imperfections.^{iv} It's transparent. It tells us he's a good reporter, recording the facts. Sometimes we're tempted to think these men were perfect saints with halos on their heads and so spiritually attuned that they always knew what God was up to; that they were so one in Christ that there were no problems among them. That's just not true. These are real people with real disagreements at times.

Here we see a difference in opinions among leadership over a genuine concern of methodology in which case neither leader is necessarily wrong (in my opinion). But then again I don't think this was a sinful blowup either. **Barnabas is clearly validated** by Paul's comment later that Mark is useful to him in the ministry, but the **Lord and the congregation clearly approved of Paul's mission** (v. 26). So both have validity. In **Paul's** leadership wisdom, the journey ahead is too difficult and the mission too great to risk bringing along someone undependable and inconsistent. It's a small team requiring unanimity, trust, and mutual support. Paul's mind is on **mission**. But **Barnabas**—the Son of Encouragement—his mind is on **people**, which is part of the mission. The mission needed dependable people, but the mission was also about redeeming people.^v So it's kind of a tossup. One man said, *"It's a classic example of the perpetual problem of whether to place the interests of the individual or of the work as a whole first, and there is no rule of thumb for dealing with it."*^{vi} Ministry leadership wrestles with this element all the time and it gives us our 1st guiding principle in that there are some areas where we may feel led differently by God and neither one is wrong.

1st Guiding Principle: The Lord leads us differently.

God just hasn't wired us all the same and doesn't lead all of us the same and that's by design. That's good. It's amazing that as a result of this disagreement, God takes advantage of both God-honoring decisions unexpectedly create two missionary teams instead of one, covering more ground. So it has a positive outcome. Barnabas and Mark go to Cyprus and Paul and Silas (the prophet from Jerusalem who came with them from the council) return to Turkey.

"40 And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. 1 Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, 2 and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. 3 Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. 4 Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. 5 So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily."

II. PAUL & SILAS STRENGTHENING THE CHURCHES. (15:41-16:5)

So there's an interesting side note to point out here in verse 40 that might give us some insight into what Paul was doing between his flight from Jerusalem (9:30) to approx. 10 years later

when Barnabas goes to Tarsus to get him and bring him to Antioch to help pastor that church (11:25). It's been referred to as Paul's silent years.^{vii} It appears he was anything but silent about Jesus. He was busy ministering in synagogues or churches in his home area of **Tarsus** and nearby **Syria**. If he had an effective ministry there, it's no wonder why Barnabas would fetch for him. Anyway, after strengthening those churches, they cross the Taurus mountains through a famous narrow pass called the **Cilician Gates** (Gulek Bogaz) and arrive at **Derbe** and **Lystra**.

2nd Guiding Principle: The Lord leads us plainly. (Prov. 16:3)

But it's here I want to point out a 2nd guiding principle. In the next paragraph, we'll see God give them direct guidance through maybe prophecy and a vision, but right now I think they're assuming a **normal, everyday approach** to following leading of the Lord. They don't need any special revelation from God to know where to go and what to do. They know God's Word and His clearly revealed will in it. They know God's calling and so that's what they're doing. The majority of the time, following the Lord's lead is simply and prayerfully operating according to the **plainly revealed will of God in the Word**. No need to pray and question, but to just take the initiative in faith, not expecting some great and glorious confirmation from heaven—a sign in the sky. **Proverbs 16:3** says, "*Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and he will establish your plans.*" A more literal translation says, "*Roll to Yahweh whatever you do*" – roll at His feet what you are doing. Submit, or entrust, your God-honoring plans to Him as your responsible service.^{viii}

But moving on, it's here at the area of Lystra and Derbe where **Timothy** joins the team. Timothy will become the **closest disciple of Paul**, his most frequently referenced ministry partner,^{ix} and an important NT personality. Two of our NT books are written to Timothy and referred to as pastoral epistles. Paul could say of Timothy that they were kindred spirits—*equal-souled* (Philippians 2:20)—they just really clicked and worked well together. Our text says of Timothy that he's **well-spoken of** by the believers in his hometown area, meaning he's a man of character, growing in the Lord, eager to serve the Lord—just the kind of young man every pastor is looking to disciple. The son of **Greek father** and devout **Jewish mother**, he's going to prove to be a vital player in gospel advancement because he can relate to Jew and Gentile.

But in order for Timothy to be *more effective* among the Jews, he needs to be **circumcised**—something he probably wished his parents would have done when he was a newborn! To do this as an adult can incapacitate a man for several days and we know that from the OT. So when it says, "*he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews,*" this isn't to appease the false teachers who were requiring circumcision, but to remove what could be a stumbling block to his ministry to the Jews. To Paul, circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing (1 Cor. 7:19), but Paul would become like a Jew to win the Jews or like a Greek to win Greeks. He became all things to all people so that he might save some (1 Cor. 9:19-22). He remained somewhat **flexible** in his **methods**. He was **culturally sensitive**. That makes for good principle.

3rd Guiding Principle: The Lord leads us adaptively.

Like Timothy and Paul, we should be willing to adapt our ministry strategies to win souls. What's winsome on the east coast, isn't necessarily winsome in western Nebraska. What's winsome and effective in one decade, probably won't be in the next. One person might be won to Christ with a radio ministry or another with a gospel tract or another through a loving neighbor's testimony or listening ear and another through preaching. We have to learn as a church to be **flexible** in our strategy. That is probably going to mean keeping up with new technology and ways to communicate the gospel and get it out there. That's why we're online and have a podcast and update our facilities somewhat. Churches that refuse to reasonably adapt, tend to die out.

But more personally, as we think about our life's calling, we need to be flexible. We need to be **surrendered and sensitive** to the direction the Lord is leading us. I can't say, "*Lord, I'll follow you*" and then refuse to answer His call. Or maybe you have answered His call but you've gotten comfortably and aren't sensitive to His leading anymore. As a pastor, I've had people ask me why pastors come and go, and how long I plan to be at Chadron Berean. I tell everyone that I don't plan on going anywhere. I came for the long haul. I tell my board members I plan to bury them! But ultimately, I don't call the shots and don't ever want to assume. I've learned to settle in long term but I also hold my plans loosely because God keeps me on a leash and it's a lot easier to be led than to be yanked. **Proverbs 16:9**: "*We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps.*" Our weather this weekend reminds us that seasons change and it can be refreshing. Each season prepares us for the next. Are you sensitive to the Lord's lead?

III. THE "SCENIC" TOUR TO EUROPE. (16:6-10)

"6 They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; 7 and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; 8 and passing by [or through] Mysia, they came down to Troas. 9 A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

11 So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; 12 and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. 13 And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we [Luke joins the team and starts narrating from personal recollection] were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled."

So talk about frustrating. They begin to move **westerly** to the region of **Asia** (not the country but the west coast of Turkey) and it says they're stopped cold in their tracks by the Holy Spirit. Get this: they're forbidden to go to Laodicea, Philadelphia, Ephesus, Colossae, etc. Then when they try to go **north** from there to the area of **Bithynia** with Nicaea and Byzantium (Constantinople/Istanbul) just south of the Black Sea, it says "*the Spirit of Jesus did not permit*

them.” So, they aren’t going back home, they can’t go west, and can’t go north. So the Lord sort forces them northwest through **Mysia** until they run out of land at **Troas**. This had to be so frustrating for these men. It feels like they’re wandering aimlessly at times I’m sure, wondering what God is up to. Ever feel that way? So did the apostles.

But you have to love this unique description for the Holy Spirit: **the Spirit of Jesus**. That’s not de-emphasizing the Trinity but emphasizing that Christ is still with them like He promised through the Person of the Holy Spirit (Col. 1:17). At the Great Commission Jesus said, “*Go... I am with you always...*” (Matt. 28:20) and He is! It gives us our 4th guiding principle.

4th Guiding Principle: The Lord leads us always.

This is beauty of following the Lord’s lead. You know that He is with you always, no matter what happens, positive or negative—whether the wind’s at your back or in your face, doors open or doors shut. I tell you, if you’re praying that prayer in the morning, “*Lord, please lead me and guide me today*” it makes it a lot harder to get mad at the interruptions of our own plans and the closed doors. If I mean that prayer, I’m going to trust the Lord to direct my affairs that day, even affairs that I deem unfortunate with my limited perspective—the cancelled flight, the flat tire, the broken appliance, the broken glass from the crazy winds blowing one of doors shut Thursday night (just saying). Honestly, I really believe sometimes He slows us down on the highway to keep us from getting into a wreck or hitting a deer. Some of these events are God’s blessing to keep us from operating in *our* timing and may be ways He’s going to advance the gospel.

I love **Psalm 32:8**. “*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.*” Understanding that changes your attitude about closed doors. It makes God’s closed doors just as important as His open doors. You see His *no* is as important as His *go*. You can rest in His timing of things. There’s three points I want to say about doors:

- 1. God reserves the authority to open and close doors.**
- 2. God opens and closes doors on His timing.**
- 3. God opens and closes doors His way.**

This is why we have to trust the Lord. He’s in charge and we are limited in ability and perspective. **Proverbs 3:5-7** says, “*But trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your way acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths.*” We don’t know why or how the Spirit prevented them from going where they were, but we do have 20/20 hindsight which shows us that churches will be planted in all of those areas they skipped in God’s timing (18:23; 19:1-10; 1 Peter 1:1).^x God’s timing is always best. Maybe that’s also illustrated by the way Dr. Luke joins the team as they head to Philippi. There was a prominent medical school there and Luke may have been familiar with this place, proving to be a great help shortly.^{xi}

We also don’t know why God would sometimes guide through direct revelation through a vision or indirect revelation. He clearly didn’t do that all the time for them. Chances are, you and I will

never experience a vision like that. We operate with indirect revelation as **we prayerfully seek God’s guidance through His Word, through godly mentors, through local church fellowship, and through preaching and teaching.** He’ll continue to affirm and give us new information through various means. One thing is sure: God’s method of guidance is not patternable and not the primary concern. What’s important is that we remain sensitive to His leading as He leads us one step at a time.

5th Guiding Principle: The Lord leads us one step at a time.

That’s how He led Paul and the team. He didn’t give them a “*2nd missionary journey map*” before they left. They followed His lead one step at a time. At times Paul might have threw up his hands and said, “*I have no clue what God is doing!*” But notice that he didn’t quit or give up. They didn’t play the victim card and pout. They just kept going and through trial and error and **patience**, God eventually gives them clear direction and the wind is at their back.

The one-step-at-a-time approach I think can also be illustrated well by **Psalm 119:105** where David said, “*Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.*” When you think of a biblical lamp, don’t think of modern headlights and these bright LED flashlights. The lamp David had in mind when he wrote that looked similar to this and it put off enough light to see just ahead. In following the Lord’s lead, we don’t have to know God’s big plan for our lives ahead of time—we need just enough to see ahead.^{xii} But are we sensitive to His lead? Are we willing to follow? For just as Paul’s sensitive following brought great blessings to the western world, so our response to the Lord’s lead is never trivial. Great and untold blessings may lie where He leads.



In my old Bible school, we used to sing this song regularly in one professor’s class. It’s called One Step at a Time.

*“One step at a time,
Only one step at a time.
This is the way the Lord will lead you,
One step at a time.
Take that one step prayerfully,
Walk that one step carefully,
This is the way of victory,
One step at a time.”*

ⁱ David Alan Black's book *Why Four Gospels?* is a brief and worthy read explaining from church history and tradition, the chronology and composition of the gospels in the biblical setting of the church's progression.

ⁱⁱ Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 51-52.

ⁱⁱⁱ Steven Charles Ger, *Acts: Beginning in Jerusalem...*, 205.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, Volume 5* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016), 310.

^{vi} David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 448.

^{vii} Mark R. Fairchild, *Lexham Geographic Commentary on Acts through Revelation* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 494.

^{viii} *GotQuestions.org* comments on this verse: "This wonderful verse speaks of our responsibility to serve God and the result of discharging our duty faithfully. The first verb, commit, is a word that, in Hebrew, literally means "to roll." Other passages such as Genesis 29:3 and Psalm 22:8-9 likewise use the idea of "rolling" something to the Lord. The idea is that we completely give something over to God in dependence upon Him. When we "commit" our work to the Lord, we offer everything we do completely to Him. The Hebrew syntax also reveals the idea that we commit our work to the Lord in order that our plans will be established. We must do the first part if we expect God to fulfill the second part. If we completely depend upon God in our work, He will "establish" our plans. That is, He will "bring about" or "cause to happen" our plans. We can expect God to bring our work to fruition in God's way and in God's time when we depend on Him in our efforts. Part of committing our work to God, of course, is seeking and following God's will; when our work aligns with God's will, then success will follow. Proverbs, as a literary form, communicate general life principles and not exact promises."

<https://www.gotquestions.org/commit-work-plans-established.html>, accessed September 11, 2022.

^{ix} Ger, 206.

^x Peterson, 457.

^{xi} Swindoll, 321. "We tend to think of success in terms of destination and progress, but wise people have learned that it's also about timing. Paul waited on the Lord and didn't press on until he had clear direction. He understood that waiting is sometimes the best way to make progress."

^{xii} The Bible Seminary YouTube channel, *Faith Lessons with Dr. Scott Stripling (Ps 119:105)*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6VQs-RPsE4>, accessed September 9, 2022.