

## 'YES' BY WAY OF 'NO'

Theme: Sometimes, God guides us toward a 'yes' in His plan by issuing a series of 'nos' first. (Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from The Holy Bible, New King James Version; copyright 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc.)

The work of God in missions isn't always as nice and neat and tidy as we might like it to be. We'd prefer to have it all mapped out for us without any questions. But God sometimes has a way of making us work through a series of frustrations and searches before a door for ministry opens. This is illustrated to us in one of the most significant stories of 'sovereign missionary guidance' in the New Testament. It's the story of what many have called 'The Macedonian Call'.

Macedonia was the region that was named after the father of Alexander the Great. It was the region north of Greece that would later become Europe. And it was to this region—rather than to others—that the Lord had led the apostle Paul in his second missionary journey. We're told in Acts 16:6-10;

*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 (Acts 16:6-10).*



Why it is that God leads in the way He does is a mystery to us. But it always shows forth His wisdom. As one commentator put it; “It must have been frustrating to have such negative guidance. But the experience was profitable inasmuch as it reminded them that the Spirit was in charge of operations. If He had said no, this simply meant that when He said yes, the plan would prove wiser than any that the missionaries were projecting” (Everett F. Harrison, *Interpreting Acts: The Expanding Church* [Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1986], p. 264).

As this passage shows us, our wise and sovereign heavenly Father often guides us toward a 'yes' in His plan by issuing a series of 'nos' first. If we remember this, we won't be so quick to see the 'nos' as a defeat; but will learn to trust Him in them.

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The story picks up in Acts 16 where verse 5 left off. We're told of how the new missionary team of Paul and Silas—now with the addition of Timothy—had accomplished the first phase of their journey. They had gone to the places where Paul had gone before and strengthened the churches.

But that being accomplished, the question the arose of what to do next. They began to travel into the regions of Phrygia and Galatia. But that leads us to ...

### **1. THE FIRST 'NO' (v. 6).**

Luke writes in verse 6, “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.” The “Asia” spoken of here is the Roman province better known to us as Asia-Minor. This would be the region in which Paul would later minister. It was the region in which the cities of Jesus' letter to the Seven Churches would be located (See Revelation 2-3). Obviously, the gospel would eventually reach them. But for some reason, this was not the time in God's plan. The missionary team was “forbidden” by the Holy Spirit (at that time, anyway) from taking the gospel to Asia.

How was it that the Holy Spirit communicated this to the missionaries? Some have suggested that Silas (who was called a prophet in Acts 15:32) may have been the instrument by which Paul communicated this to them. Or it may have been that certain circumstances worked against them and prevented them from going; and they—somehow—knew that it was the Holy Spirit' way of saying 'no'. But however it was that it happened, it became clear to them that it was not God's will for them to go to Asia.

These missionaries didn't conclude, however, that the work was to stop. They kept on going forward as best they knew—trusting God to lead them along the way. They went past Asia-Minor to the north toward Mysia. And this was when they encountered ...

### **2. THE SECOND 'NO' (v. 7).**

Luke tells us in verse 7, “After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them.” Again, just how it was that the Holy Spirit 'did not permit them' to go to the north-eastern region of Bithynia isn't told to us. But it seems as if they were hitting yet another wall—and it was the Holy Spirit Himself that was putting the wall before them. It must have been especially frustrating; because the Spirit was only telling them where *not* to go—but He was not yet telling them where He wanted them *to* go instead.

But such times of waiting—along with the searching—are apparently a part of God's method of leading. It could be that this time of wandering was because the specific people, to whom God wanted the gospel to be taken, were not yet ready to hear it. Or it could even be that the

missionaries themselves were not yet ready bring it to them. We should never assume that, when there are road-blocks along the way, it must be because God doesn't care. Those waiting times and those wandering times may have a very necessary purpose in God's sovereign plan. Think of how God tested the people of Israel during the time that they themselves wandered in the wilderness. Just before He brought them finally into the land, He told them;

*“And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. You should know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so the Lord your God chastens you” (Deuteronomy 8:2-5).*

We should always assume that if God is allowing us to be frustrated in the unfolding of His plan to us, it's because there is something that needs to be developed first—either in us or in someone else that He intends for us to witness to. In the end, His plans—though at times frustrating—always prove to be right.

Now; Paul and Silas and Timothy must have been looking toward the Lord, and listening for His will the whole time long. No doubt, there was a lot of praying and searching of the soul that was going on. But that leads us—finally—to ...

### **3. THE CLARIFYING VISION (vv. 8-9).**

Luke tells us in verses 8-9, “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.’” There's been a lot of speculation, by the way, about who this 'man' was. But it's a bit silly to try to determine his identity. He was a man in a vision; and the vision was only meant to give Paul and the others direction of where to go next. The only thing Paul knew for sure—and all, in fact, that he *needed* to know—was that he was a man of Macedonia. As an instrument of God's leading, the vision couldn't be clearer!

When we read of how God gave this clear vision, it might be good to remember the words of the Lord Jesus. He said in Matthew 7:7-8;

*“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8).*

You'll notice that Jesus didn't say that if we ask, then the very thing that we ask will be given to us; or that if we seek, then we will find exactly what we were seeking; or that if we knock, then the very door upon which we knocked on will be opened to whatever it was we were hoping it would open up to! God often gives us something greater than we were asking for; or allows us to find something better than what we were seeking; or opens a door that we never expected to something that we never anticipated. But we should know that if we ask, we *will* receive; and if we seek, we *will* find; and that if we knock, a door *will* be opened. Clearly, the asking, seeking, and knocking of the missionaries paid off—though it led to something they hadn't anticipated.

But it's important to notice what happened as a result. As soon as the clarity of God's will was given, the missionaries didn't hesitate. They operated on ...

#### **4. THE AUTHORITATIVE GUIDANCE (v. 10).**

Luke wrote in verse 10; “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.” And indeed God had! The next thing we find in verse 11 is that they “sailed from Troas” across the Aegean Sea—and “ran a straight course”. That means that the 125 mile journey was surprisingly swift. It was as if God was confirming to the missionaries that they are now on the right track and are going where He wanted them to go.

And did you notice a very important detail? Up to this point, Luke—the author of the Book of Acts—had been simply reporting the activities of Paul in the third person. But now—and from this point on—Luke writes in the first person; saying “we”. He was now a part of the team. Perhaps the delay was intended—in some sense—to force the missionaries to wait for this important historian to join the team and report the details to us of what God did through His missionaries in the spread of the gospel! Who knows? If there hadn't been that series of 'nos' first, we might not have been able to read the first hand account of the spread of the gospel in the Book of Acts.

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When we are seeking God's will for our lives—and when we are prayerfully and faithfully walking with dependency upon Him—we should never be discouraged by the times when He seems to remain silent or when we suffer frustrations and delays. They are as much a necessary part of His leading as His clear and distinct calls.

We should learn instead to wait on His timing—trusting that He will give the call when the time is right; and recognizing that His "no" very often means a "yes" to something far greater than we can imagine.