

Why Didn't Paul Preach in Asia?

Acts 16:6: *They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the holy spirit to speak the word in Asia.*



When we read the Bible, it sometimes appears to say things that just don't make sense. Think about the scripture that plainly says God did not want Paul to preach the gospel in Asia. Why would that be? Jesus told his disciples to preach the word throughout the world. Didn't Asia count? This apparent discrepancy can stimulate all kinds of questions and even provoke doubt as to the equity of God's character. The good news is, the answer to all of this is not only sensible, but it is profound and inspiring as well. When we understand the lay of the land—the literal geography of the area—and the big picture of the mission the disciples were given, a whole new conclusion emerges.

When we think of Asia, we might think of the world's largest and most populated continent with the countries of Japan, China, India, Thailand, South Korea, Turkey, Pakistan, parts of Russia and others. Today, only one percent of people in Japan are Christian. Only two percent of people in China are Christian, and so on. Does this trace back to Paul being forbidden to spread the gospel message here so long ago? The simple answer is no, but there are wonderful lessons worth looking into more closely.



Let's look at the context of the first time God refocused Paul's direction by instructing him not to preach.

Paul was in Antioch (Syria) revisiting several churches as he traveled northwest:
Acts 16:1-4: *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... 2 ...he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. 3 Paul wanted this man to go with him... 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.*

It helps to look at the map of Paul's second missionary journey (as follows) to see where these cities were located. Paul was in Derbe and then Lystra. These are cities in the Roman province of Galatia in Asia Minor. Asia Minor is our modern-day Turkey in Western Asia. So, it's a tiny part of the huge continent of Asia, in what we now call the Middle East.

Paul is going on a massive missionary journey. Here in Lystra is where he met Timothy. *Paul wanted this man to go with him*—Timothy would become an integral part of the entire gospel mission.



<https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/map-44-o8/>
Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch for a few years after their first missionary journey. Some people traveling through Antioch from Judea were teaching that the Christian Gentiles needed to be circumcized and to practice the Jewish Law rituals. Paul and Barnabas sharply disagreed with this, so they decided to go down to Jerusalem to confer with the elders and apostles there.

A large council was gathered in Jerusalem (**Acts 15**) to discuss the issues between Jewish and Gentile Christians, including Christian liberty. With the aim of encouraging unity and fellowship between the two groups, the council composed a letter outlining its conclusions.

Paul will now spread this information to the existing churches:

Acts 16:5-6: 5 So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily. 6 They passed through the Phrygian (a district in central Asia Minor, part of the Roman province of Asia) and Galatian region (province), having been forbidden by the holy spirit to speak the word in Asia.

Remember, Paul is already on the *continent* of Asia. He started from Jerusalem, and Israel is in Asia. **Acts 16:6** is referring to the Roman province called Asia.

The province of Asia and the province of Galatia were next to each other with the district of Phrygia on the border between them.

This first refocusing of direction was given as they were getting ready to enter the Roman province of Asia. Paul was interested in evangelizing in Asia, the province right before them. They had traveled north and then west from Antioch in Syria, through Derbe, Lystra, Iconium (in the province of Galatia) and were approaching Phrygia on the edge of the province of Asia.



(Source: Albert Barnes' Notes on the Whole Bible) Of this region Ephesus was the capital; and here were situated also the cities of Smyrna, Thyatira, Philadelphia, etc., within which the seven churches, mentioned in Revelation chapters 1–3, were established.

We know the Roman province of Asia eventually became an important part of early Christian history—the gospel WAS extensively preached in this area. It became a central part of the New Testament narrative.

So, why wasn't Paul supposed to teach there at this time?

Paul's whole life was focused on fulfilling the clearly assigned mission he received at his conversion—to be an evangelist:

Acts 9:13–16: *13 But Ananias answered, Lord (speaking to the risen Jesus he is seeing in a vision), I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to your saints at Jerusalem; 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name. 15 But the Lord said to him, Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; 16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake.*

Paul had amazing zeal and just needed to be pointed in the right direction, and off he went! How hard would this have been for him to not stop here and preach to everyone he could find. But Paul obeyed and continued with the journey.

How God's spirit—His power and influence—made this so clear to him, we are not told.



What we do know is that Paul had an energetic, submissive and serving heart that followed where God's spirit led. He was driven, like a spiritual wind-up toy. Once wound up, he would preach, preach, preach and keep going in that direction. Nothing stopped him. This is who Paul was; but nevertheless, he obeyed.

The principle for us is, even if we feel we have a mission like Paul's mission to evangelize, we have to make sure it is in the context of God's spirit. We might think we know what we are supposed to do until God shows us there is a different way to move forward. God might redirect and refocus our direction.



The Power of God-Instructed, Refocused Direction

Paul's example of not preaching teaches us a fundamental lesson. As disciples of Christ, we are to simply follow the leadings God provides for us, even when it might mean we don't get to engage in some privileged work. Paul was not given a reason for not preaching, but he was given a clearly refocused direction, and he complied!

The key to answering, "Why couldn't Paul preach in Asia?" is to remember "Asia" in this context refers to the tiny Roman province of Asia, not the massive continent of Asia with its countries of Russia, Japan, China, India and others. Further, Paul wasn't told, "Don't EVER preach here." He was just held back—the timing was "not yet."

Often, the timing in our lives is “not yet,” and things turn out very differently from our expectations.

Paul listened. When we consider the amazing zeal and strength Paul expended in starting churches and continuously preaching, we realize how difficult it would have been for him NOT to stop and preach as he traveled through the province of Asia.

Having listened, Paul and the brethren approach the northern borders of Asia:

Acts 16:7: *7 and after they came to (the Roman district of) Mysia, they were trying to go into (the Roman province of) Bithynia, and the spirit of Jesus did not permit them;*

This time they were thwarted from entering Bithynia to the north, and *the spirit of Jesus* intervened. This raises two questions:

1. Why couldn't they go into Bithynia?
2. What is *the spirit of Jesus*?

Once again, Paul and his companions were traveling directly toward a province, and the Lord intervenes with, *You can't go there either!*

Paul had been given this mission to preach from the Lord Jesus himself, *to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel*. Twice now, Paul is told he is not supposed to go there.



The answer to why Paul was prevented from going here lies in the “big picture” of what was supposed to happen with the gospel. Always consider the big picture context with our own daily challenges!

Jesus describes the big picture just before his ascension:

Luke 24:46–47: *46 and he said to them, Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.*

This was a specific message from Jesus—he would ascend to heaven, and they would not see him anymore in the flesh. The message of *repentance for forgiveness of sins* was to be preached to all nations, starting in Jerusalem.

Remember these two pieces, as they are critical to our understanding of this prohibition to preach in Asia:

- The message is to all nations.
- The mission starts in Jerusalem, and then goes to all nations.

In accordance with God's providence, the Apostle Peter was tasked with the ministry throughout Asia and Bithynia:

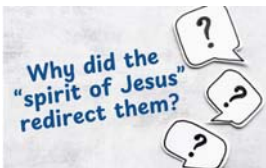
1 Peter 1:1-2: *1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen 2 according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with his blood: may grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.*

The Apostles Paul and Peter were working separately on the same big picture mission, and Peter had Bithynia covered. At this time, only a few individuals had limited time to deliver a really big message in order for this new concept of Christianity to take hold. They needed to be efficient and smart in the logistics of their mission.

They couldn't just text each other, *By the way, Peter, where are you with this evangelizing?* Think about it! They had few ways to communicate, so we see God's spirit guiding one apostle to go one way and guiding the other to cover another area, with neither one knowing or even needing to know what the other is doing. The direction for both came from above.

Though Paul and Peter were working separately, they were in perfect harmony with their collective mission to preach the gospel to all nations. Where was the gospel to be delivered next?

We understand *the spirit of Jesus* to be the power and impact that Jesus and his life and example have upon us. (Note, the phrase *the spirit of Jesus* appears as simply *spirit* in the King James Version and other older versions.)



With this in mind, we continue with the Acts account:

Acts 16:8-10: *8 and passing by (the Roman district of) Mysia, they came down to Troas (a region within Mysia). 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.*

2 Timothy 4:13 - Paul asked Timothy to bring him the coat, books and parchment he left here in Troas.



To get from Troas to Macedonia, they had to travel by boat over the Aegean Sea. This was a clear mission for the Apostle Paul to follow.

Macedonia was a Roman province. Today, parts of ancient Macedonia are in Greece, North Macedonia, Albania and Bulgaria. Mount Olympus is located here. Alexander the Great was from here. So, Paul gets a vision with clear direction as to where to go next. With all of his energy and zeal, he needed to simply keep walking in faith for his next instruction.

How does the second redirection for the Apostle Paul and his companions reflect *the spirit of Jesus*? At least now they knew where to go, but the best way to answer how this reflects Jesus' spirit is to let Jesus explain it himself.

Early in his ministry, Jesus was at a synagogue in Nazareth and was called upon to read a portion of **Isaiah 61:1,2**. There is a dramatic connection between Jesus' ministry and Paul's ministry after Jesus died.

Nazareth was a poor Jewish town that did not have a good reputation:

Luke 4:17–21: *17 And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. And he opened the book and found the place where it was written, 18 THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, 19 TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD. 20 And he closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 And he began to say to them, Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

What great news for the poor and needy listening in Nazareth! Unfortunately, they essentially rejected Jesus. But it says, *The spirit of the Lord is upon me...* What was Jesus driven by God to do? To help the poor, the captives, the sick, the oppressed; to preach the gospel, to spread the message.

This encapsulated *the spirit of Jesus* because he had the spirit of God driving him to do these things. Perhaps Paul's vision of a Macedonian man needing help revealed to him the depth, power and direction of his own coming ministry—exactly what our Lord Jesus came to do. Paul was being driven to do the same.

Obviously *the spirit of Jesus*—this provoking Paul to action—wasn't about always carrying five loaves of bread and two fish on him to continually multiply for whoever is hungry. Macedonia was a poor place, but what they really needed was the gospel message. The gospel is an even bigger message for all of humanity who are starving and sin-sick.

Macedonia needed the gospel; they needed Paul's attention. He walked all that time through the province of Asia without stopping to preach. He was turned away from Bithynia with no idea he was needed in Macedonian. He was just faithfully following instructions to the point where it is obvious he has to cross the Aegean Sea, he is ready and where he needs to be!

Macedonia embraced the gospel, even though they had been steeped in idolatry and faced many serious challenges. Yet, years later Paul reports to other churches in their vicinity of their strong spirituality despite their problems.

How beautifully the Macedonian brethren have matured into Christ:

2 Corinthians 8:1–2: *1 Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, 2 that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality.*

In a great ordeal of affliction they had an abundance of joy! Despite deep poverty (beyond just trying to make ends meet), they overflowed in the wealth of their liberality.

In his travels, the Apostle Paul would bring news of other Christians who were in great need. Despite their deep poverty and great affliction, the Macedonian Christians wanted to help their brethren afar off. They felt attached to them through Christ. They had been given a hope in Christ that superseded all of their trouble, all of their poverty and all of their affliction.

It made their issues of no effect because the apostle showed them something magnificent:

2 Corinthians 8:3-5: *3 For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, 4 begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, 5 and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.*

Paul is writing to the Corinthians, who were not nearly as impoverished as the Macedonians. He testifies that the Macedonians gave beyond their ability to contribute because they wanted to help these brethren whom they had never met.

We can imagine Paul mentioning the other churches who needed help, and the Macedonians are all digging around in their pockets to find an odd coin or two. Perhaps Paul told them something like, *No, it's okay. It is too tough for you to give in your situation.* But they insisted, knowing Paul was in a position to get their contribution to those in need. They didn't have much but wanted to use what they had to help others.

Paul was trying to dissuade the Macedonians, but they were *begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints.* Finding these inspiring Macedonians showed Paul what God through Christ had in store for him. Paul wasn't told about this surprise blessing at the beginning of the journey. He was simply told to walk, obey and don't stop to preach in certain locations yet. It was a great lesson for Paul and a precious lesson for us.

Paul was prolific in spreading the gospel in Macedonia. Not only did he start thriving churches in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, but it's thought he also wrote the books of 2 Corinthians, 1 Timothy and Titus from here. This experience in Macedonia excited his heart! He was able to preach the gospel in a bigger way than he could have if he had not listened to the Lord's directions.

This is only the beginning of the story. The beauty of being guided by God's spirit through the spirit of Jesus would now be revealed. The churches in this region were the first of a massive expansion of the gospel message. From here, the gospel could be spread throughout Europe, and from Europe to the whole world, which is what Jesus had said Paul would be doing.

(Source: gotquestions.org) Paul obeyed the vision. ...they would go to Macedonia (the northern and central parts of modern-day Greece). Local bodies of believers were established in Philippi (Acts 16:40) and Thessalonica (Acts 17:4) in Macedonia, and in Corinth in nearby Achaia (Acts 18:1–11). These churches were important in the growth of the early church and enjoyed a long-term relationship with the apostles. Five of the New Testament epistles were written to these three churches...

This area is still known as the gateway to Europe. Up to that point in history, the gospel had been limited to Asia, and many historians credit Paul's heeding the Macedonian Call with the spread of Christianity into Europe and the Western world. ...The history of the church—and of the world—forever changed because of the God-given dream known as the Macedonian Call.

Paul and his companions wouldn't have been where they needed to be had they lingered in Galatia any longer. This is less about God forbidding Paul to preach in Asia and more about Paul's trusting God's divine timing. What a lesson for us!

Remember Jesus' words before his ascension in **Luke 24:47**: *...repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.*

- The message is to all nations.
- The mission starts in Jerusalem and then goes to all nations.

Where did Paul start this journey? In Jerusalem. When he goes into Macedonia, he goes through the gateway to Europe, which was the gateway to the rest of the world—*all the nations*.

The Apostle Paul fulfilled Jesus' words spoken at his ascension. Paul started in Jerusalem and then worked his way through various locations to the gateway to Europe, opening the gospel there. What a powerful message! He followed exactly what God's spirit led him to do and was blessed by finding wonderful Christians. He worked within the context of the spirit of what Jesus would have done and how Jesus would have accomplished it.



The Power of God-Instructed, Refocused Direction

God's plans and purposes are always far above any plans or imaginations of our own minds. By keeping him from preaching in Asia at that specific time, God arranged for Paul to be His tool to open the door for the gospel to spread into Europe and then to the rest of the world.

When God says no, it is always to make room for a bigger yes!

We want to understand the magnitude of God's command regarding Asia, *NO, don't go there*. When Paul gets near Bithynia, God says again, *No, don't go there*. There was a bigger mission and plans Paul did not know about.

How often in our Christian walk do we have to look at our plans and add, *If God wills*. We must keep our hearts and minds open so that we too can follow the directions and instructions of God's spirit and providence.

Working through His spirit, we can be part of what God's plan is all about—the salvation of the world!

**So, why didn't Paul preach in Asia?
For Rick, Jonathan, Julie and Christian Questions...
...Think about it!**

All scriptures cited are from the NASB1995 translation unless otherwise noted.



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Bonus Material and Study Questions

Two independent sources to deepen our understanding of the clarity of the “no” answer Paul received:

(Source: gotquestions.org) Paul obeyed the vision. If the Macedonians needed help, then they would go to Macedonia (the northern and central parts of modern-day Greece). The Macedonian Call resulted in Paul and his companions' sailing from Troas to Neapolis, stopping for the night on the island of Samothrace. From Neapolis, they continued on to the Roman colony of Philippi, the leading city of that district of Macedonia (Acts 16:11–12). This area is still known as the gateway to Europe. Up to that point in history, the gospel had been limited to Asia, and many historians credit Paul's heeding the Macedonian Call with the spread of Christianity into Europe and the Western world. Much happened in Macedonia. Lydia's conversion (Acts 16:14–15), the deliverance of a fortune-telling slave girl (Acts 16:16–18), Paul and Silas' imprisonment in Philippi (Acts 16:16–28), the conversion of the jailer and his household (Acts 16:29–34), and Paul's preaching in the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:16–34) are some of the highlights of the second missionary journey. Paul planted several churches in response to the Macedonian Call. Local bodies of believers were established in Philippi (Acts 16:40) and Thessalonica (Acts 17:4) in Macedonia, and in Corinth in nearby Achaia (Acts 18:1–11). These churches were important in the growth of the early church and enjoyed a long-term relationship with the apostles. Five of the New Testament Epistles were written to these three churches. The history of the church—and of the world—forever changed because of the God-given dream known as the Macedonian Call.

(Source: Albert Barnes' Commentary on the Whole Bible)

Verse 6. Throughout Phrygia. This was the largest province of Asia Minor. It had Bithynia, north; Pisidia and Lycia, south; Galatia and Cappadocia, east; and Lydia and Mysia, west.

And the region of Galatia. This province was directly east of Phrygia. The region was formerly conquered by the Gauls. They settled in it, and called it, after their own name, Galatia. The Gauls invaded the country at different times, and no less than three tribes or bodies of Gauls had possession of it. Many Jews were also settled there. It was from this cause that so many parties could be formed there, and that so much controversy would arise between the Jewish and Gentile converts. See the Epistle to the Galatians.

And were forbidden. Probably by a direct revelation. The reason of this was, doubtless, that it was the intention of God to extend the gospel farther into the regions of Greece than would have been done if they had remained in Asia Minor. This prohibition was the means of the first introduction of the gospel into Europe.

In Asia. See Barnes Acts 2:9. This was doubtless the region of proconsular Asia. This region was also called Ionia. Of this region Ephesus was the capital; and here were situated also the cities of Smyrna, Thyatira, Philadelphia, etc., within which the seven churches, mentioned in Revelation chapters 1–3, were established. Cicero speaks of proconsular Asia as containing the provinces of Phrygia, Mysia, Caria and Lydia. In all this region the gospel was afterwards preached with great success. But now a more important and wider field was opened before Paul and Barnabas, in the extensive country of Macedonia.

Study QUESTIONS

Ep.1355: Why Didn't Paul Preach in Asia?

See:  CQ Rewind
SHOW NOTES

<https://christianquestions.com/doctrine/1335-preach-in-asia/>

1. What was Paul's purpose in traveling to Jerusalem before going on his second missionary journey? What continent was Paul on when he was in Jerusalem and Antioch (his "home base")? (Acts 15, 16:1-5)
2. As Paul and his companions approached the Roman province of Asia, what happened to their plans to evangelize in that province? What was the mission given to Paul by Jesus? Did Paul take this seriously? Did Jesus encourage Paul to fulfill his mission in the province of Asia? (Acts 9:13-16, 16:6)
3. Relate the events of Acts 16:7. What are the two parts of the "big picture" Jesus describes in Luke 24:46-47? Why is God's big picture important to keep in mind during our own daily challenges? How did the big picture figure into Peter's mission in 1 Peter 1:1-2?
4. What was the vision Paul had in Troas? What was Jesus driven to do by God's spirit? How do Paul and his companions reflect "the spirit of Jesus" in a similar way as Jesus reflected God's spirit? (Acts 16:8-10, Luke 4:17-21)
5. How did the Macedonian brethren respond to the gospel preached to them? What was their condition financially? How did they react to hearing of brethren far off who were struggling? Explain how Paul's journey to Macedonia was profitable for the spreading of the gospel. (2 Corinthians 8:1-5)
6. Have you ever planned to do something to serve God and had that plan thwarted? Has this episode helped you gain perspective over your frustrated actions?
7. Why was Macedonia's geographic position important for the spreading of the gospel? Explain how Jesus' statements in Luke 24:47 were fulfilled through Paul NOT preaching in the provinces of Asia and Bithynia. What blessings did Paul receive for following the heavenly instructions rather than indulging his own preferences?
8. Have you received unexpected blessings like Paul found in Macedonia after your plans went awry? Please discuss blessings you have received and spiritual/character growth you have noticed in yourself from the challenges you go through in daily life.

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