

Sept 27, 2026 – Leader's Guide

When the Spirit Redirects

Acts 15:36-16:15

This Sunday we continued a sermon series entitled *“Empowered to Bear Witness to Jesus’ Kingdom.”* This series focuses on how the risen and ascended Jesus empowers his disciples for mission through the gift of the outpoured Holy Spirit.

Small Group Questions

- 1. Read Acts 15:36–16:5 together. As you read this section, what stands out to you? What surprises you, confuses you, or raises questions? Pay particular attention to the people, decisions, conflicts, and changes of direction in the story.**

Leader notes:

Let people simply observe before interpreting. You may want to write observations down.

Things they may notice:

- Paul wants to revisit the churches they previously visited (15:36).
 - Paul and Barnabas have a sharp disagreement over John Mark.
 - They separate rather than resolving the disagreement.
 - Barnabas takes Mark; Paul takes Silas.
 - Paul chooses Timothy to join the team.
 - Timothy has a complicated Jewish/Gentile background.
 - The churches are strengthened and continue to grow.
 - God's mission continues despite an unexpected rupture between two significant leaders.
 - The passage doesn't present a perfectly controlled or tidy process.
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- 2. Look again at Acts 15:36–16:5.** Paul begins this journey with a fairly straightforward plan: *“Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord.”* (15:36) **What seems to be Paul's responsibility in this part of the story, and what seems to be God's responsibility? What does Paul actually know about what he's supposed to do — and what doesn't he know?**

Leader notes:

Help the group distinguish between **faithful practice and having a complete and “perfect plan”**.

Paul knows:

- He is called to proclaim the gospel.
- He should strengthen the churches.
- He should continue the mission.

But he doesn't appear to have a detailed roadmap for the entire journey.

If you want to press into this question a bit more:

What would change in our lives if we believed we don't need to see the whole path before taking the next faithful step?

- 3. Read Acts 16:6–10 slowly.** Ask the group to identify every change of direction they can see. **What does Luke tell us about how Paul and his companions were guided? What do they know at each stage, and what remains unclear?**

Leader notes:

Notice the progression:

- They go through Phrygia and Galatia.
- They are **“forbidden by the Holy Spirit”** to speak the word in Asia.
- They attempt to go into Bithynia.
- **“The Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.”**
- They go to Traos still not knowing the plan.
- Paul receives the Macedonian vision.
- Only then do they conclude that God has called them to Macedonia.

An important observation: Luke doesn't give us a formula for discernment. We aren't told exactly how Paul knew the Spirit was preventing one route or another.

The emphasis is less on *“How can I know God's will with certainty?”* and more on remaining responsive to God's direction as we take the next step.

You might press in:

What do you think Paul had to surrender in order to remain open to God's redirection?

- 4. The Spirit prevents Paul from going into two places where he apparently intended to minister. How might Paul have interpreted those closed doors? What are some possible ways we might interpret closed doors in our own lives?**

Based on this passage, what can we say with confidence about closed doors — and what can we *not* say with confidence?

Leader notes:

This is a good place to resist simplistic conclusions such as “*Every closed door means God has something better.*” Acts doesn't give us that formula.

What we can see:

- Paul experiences genuine obstacles to his plans.
- He doesn't abandon the mission.
- He remains attentive and keeps moving.
- Eventually God provides clearer direction toward Macedonia.

The point isn't that every frustrating circumstance is secretly a divine redirection. Rather, discipleship involves holding our plans with open hands and remaining attentive to the Spirit.

- 5. Read Acts 16:11–15. What do you notice about Lydia and the way she comes to faith? What does Luke emphasize about Paul's activity and about God's activity?**

Leader notes:

Important observations:

- Paul gets to Macedonia, but there is no grand evangelistic event.
- They go outside the city gate to a place of prayer.
- Lydia is already seeking God.
- Paul speaks.

- “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”
- Lydia and her household are baptized.
- Lydia immediately opens her home to the missionaries.

There is a beautiful balance:

- Paul speaks.
- Lydia listens.
- God opens her heart.

The mission isn't ultimately a project Paul accomplishes. It is something God is doing, with Paul participating in it.

6. In Acts 15:36–16:15 we see people making plans, encountering obstacles, changing direction, investing in people, and discovering what God is doing along the way. Where are you currently facing a situation in which you know something about God's calling or faithfulness, but don't know exactly what the next step is? What might it look like to:

- **practice faithfulness rather than wait for perfect clarity;**
- **surrender your plans rather than try to control the outcome;**
- **pay attention to the people God puts in your path rather than becoming consumed with the project or plan?**

Leader notes:

Give people some quiet time before discussion. This question can become overly abstract unless you invite people to name a **specific situation**.

You might finish with:

“What is one next faithful step you can actually see?”

Don't pressure people to manufacture a dramatic “Spirit-led” answer. The next step might be very ordinary: make a phone call, have a conversation, apologize, show hospitality, begin something you've been putting off, or remain faithful where God has already placed them.

Close in prayer.

