

## The 2<sup>nd</sup> Journey Begins

(How do we discern God's Leading?)  
Acts 15:40-16:15 on July 4, 2021  
Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson



Please read Acts 15:40 through 16:15 before going further in this transcript.

Let's begin this morning by consider a question: **How do we discern God's leading?** When we're trying to do God's will, and we're trying to make a decision that will please Him, how do we decide? How do we discern God's leading? We're not asking here so much in terms of moral decisions or clear right/wrong, but rather in terms of life decisions, where God's will seems a little more "open-ended." In times where there are multiple good choices before us, how do we discern God's leading? God's leading for things like: - What job to pursue. - What college to attend. - Where to live, what apartment to rent, or what house to buy. - Which ministry to serve in, and which opportunities to say "no" to? - Whether to buy a new car, or fix the old one? Or upgrade to a TRUCK!?! - Whether to have more kids, or not, or whether to adopt or do foster care? And on and on we could go; life is FULL of decisions like these.

Back in Acts 14:27, we learned that God had "opened a door of faith" to the Gentiles." One of our younger church attenders drew this picture, to help illustrate her understanding of how God leads >>> (Here we see God reaching down from the clouds and opening the door for the Gentiles. And, apparently, they're allowed to bring their dog along!) If only God's leading were always THIS literal, and THIS clear. How do we know when God is "opening a door" or, for that matter, "closing a door" in our lives? The New Testament doesn't give us a steady, consistent pattern or a universal process for discerning God's leading. Instead, what we seem to find is a whole collection of different methods and means of how God leads in people's lives. For example:<sup>1</sup>



- > At the end of Acts 1, they nominate two men, and pray and cast lots to pick one.
- > In Acts 6, they choose 7 godly men and pray and lay hands on them all of them.
- > At the beginning of Acts 8, persecution scatters the believers all over the place. In other words, circumstance drove their direction.
- > At the end of Acts 8, an angel of the Lord tells Phillip exactly which chariot to stand next to.
- > In Acts 10, Peter falls into a trance during his prayer time and sees a vision and the Holy Spirit tells Peter to go with the men at his doorstep.<sup>2</sup>

- > In Acts 13, while the Antioch church was worshipping and fasting, the Holy Spirit tells them to set apart Barnabas and Saul. This is what we refer to as the 1<sup>st</sup>

<sup>1</sup> > At the beginning of Acts 1, the disciples have direct access to Jesus, so they do what Jesus tells them, "don't leave Jerusalem, wait for the Holy Spirit."

<sup>2</sup> > In Acts 12, the church prays earnestly for Peter and an angel breaks him out of jail.

Missionary Journey. They discerned that this was God's will for them, in response to a prompting from the Holy Spirit.

> Now, at the end of Acts 15, as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Missionary Journey begins, we don't read about any prompting from the Holy Spirit. In fact, we don't hear about any prayer meeting either. No worship service, no fasting, no vision from God, no angels, etc. Instead, here's what we read in Acts 15:36, "Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.'" The immediate context indicates that it simply made sense. Certainly, there may have been worship and fasting and a prompting from the Holy Spirit, but that's not recorded for us in the text. When it comes to discerning God's leading, which approach should you and I use, in the year 2021?<sup>3</sup> The fact is, Scripture doesn't give us a super clear answer. So this message isn't planning to give a super clear answer either. But let's keep the question of how we discern God's leading in mind, as we dig into today's text.

Today we are picking up where we left off last week, at the end of Acts 15. Take a look at **MAP #1** on the back page of this transcript. Barnabas and Mark head west (the BLUE arrows), across the water, for the Island of Cyprus while, at the same time, Paul and Silas head north (the YELLOW arrows), across land, through the northern edge of Syria, then west into Cilicia (probably right through Saul's hometown of Tarsus). Acts 16:1 clarifies for us that they then actually begin in Derbe and Lystra, which is in the reverse order from the 1<sup>st</sup> Missionary Journey.

Please turn or click in your Bible to Acts 15:40, ""but Paul chose Silas and left...." We were introduced to Silas back in Acts 15, when we learned about the Jerusalem Council. Silas was one of the two men that the council chose to deliver the letter to the new Gentile believers in Antioch. This letter urged the new Gentiles Christians to "abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality."<sup>4</sup> Silas was actually a fantastic choice for Paul's 2nd Missionary Journey.<sup>5</sup> That's because, Acts 16:4 tells us, that one of the things that they will do on this journey, is deliver the letter from the Jerusalem Council to these other churches.<sup>6 7</sup>

Acts 16:1 goes on, "Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek." Timothy was quite young at this point in his life, likely in his teens.<sup>8</sup> Timothy

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<sup>3</sup> Which of these approaches were only formative in the Early Church, and which ones might we view as normative?

<sup>4</sup> See Acts 15:29.

<sup>5</sup> Silas is the traveling companion that Paul chose as an alternate to Barnabas and John-Mark.

<sup>6</sup> In Acts 16:5 we once again find evidence of the Gentiles gladly responding with obedience to the directions in this letter. The churches are being strengthened and they are growing numerically each and every day.

<sup>7</sup> You see, the letter wasn't just for the church in Antioch, but for all of the churches at that time in history. "Silas is a good choice since he represents the Jerusalem church and thus lends credibility to the Jerusalem [Council's decision]." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2252 footnote on Acts 15:36-41.

<sup>8</sup> This likelihood is based on the fact that some 15 years later, Paul still addresses him as a young man in 1 Timothy 4:12. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1857 footnote on Acts 16:1.

faced a fairly challenging set of circumstances growing up. His mom was Jewish, his dad was Greek. And, his mom was a believer, and apparently his dad was not.<sup>9</sup> At this point in our text, Paul does something a little confusing, something unexpected, even seemingly hypocritical. Acts 16:3 says, “Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all KNEW that his father was a Greek.”<sup>10</sup> Now given that a major part of their ministry was going to be delivering the letter from the Jerusalem Council, which clarified that Gentiles do NOT need to be circumcised, these feels a bit off. However, upon further reflection, it makes good, strategic sense for Paul to do this. First of all, from a Jewish point of view, Timothy was considered Jewish, not Gentile, because “an uncircumcised son, of a Jewish mother, was regarded in Judaism, as an apostate Jew, a violator of the covenant.”<sup>11 12</sup> One Bible commentator notes: “Timothy poses a special problem because he is the child of a mixed marriage. His mother...is a Jewish believer... whereas his father is Greek... [aka, a Gentile]... [circumcising him] prevents Timothy from becoming an issue to the Jews to whom he would minister.... So, out of respect for the customs of his prospective evangelistic audience, [Paul] acts to render moot any debate over Timothy’s lineage.”<sup>13 14 15</sup> Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22, “Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews... [then in verse 22 he concludes]... I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.”<sup>16</sup> One pastor puts it this way: “Paul let the small things go,

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<sup>9</sup> This seems pretty clear from the way Luke records verse 1, and also because silence concerning his father’s faith would suggest he wasn’t a convert to Judaism nor a believer in Christ.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1857 footnote on Acts 16:1.

<sup>10</sup> “This was different from Titus’s case (see Galatians 2:3), where circumcision was refused because some were demanding it as necessary for salvation.” (*The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1857 footnote on Acts 16:3.) Paul explains it this way in Galatians 2:3, “Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.” In Titus’s situation, it seems that he made his own decision to remain uncircumcised. In Timothy’s situation, it seems that Paul made the judgment call to have him circumcised. Perhaps because of his youth, perhaps because they were about to set out on a long journey that would involve meeting with and witnessing to many Jews along the way.

<sup>11</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 523.

<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, bringing Greeks into the Jewish temple was “Explicitly forbidden according to inscribed stone markers.... Any Gentiles found within the bounds of the court of Israel would be killed.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1870 footnote on Acts 21:28.

<sup>13</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, pp. 521-522.

<sup>14</sup> This same commentator goes on... “In sum, what is seen here is Paul’s cultural sensitivity. Instead of making Timothy a sideshow to the gospel in terms of whether he was a Jew or not, Paul permitted circumcision so that the gospel would remain the main topic. Knowing which principles are worth standing up for and which ideas are not worth elevating to an importance they do not deserve is a sign of **discernment** and leadership. Not every issue is worth starting a war over when it comes to the gospel and the ethnic unity of the church.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 524.

<sup>15</sup> We’ll see Paul do a similar thing later on in Acts 21:24, when he joins in a Jewish purification rite, to demonstrate his obedience to God’s law. His reason for doing this was to avoid any unnecessary disruption or confusion among the thousands of Jews who’d put their faith in Jesus. In other words, Paul still honored Jehovah God, he still respected the teachings of Moses, and he still honored various Jewish customs and family practices. Despite their freedom in Christ, some Jewish Christians still chose to observe certain Jewish rites. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1869 footnote on Acts 21:24. (We aren’t given any detail, but in Acts 18:18, Paul has his hair cut in connection with a Jewish vow he’d taken. See Numbers 6:1-21 for detailed instructions regarding temporary Nazirite vows of dedication to the LORD.)

<sup>16</sup> In Galatians 6:15 Paul says, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation.” See also Galatians 5:16.

to keep the gospel door open.”<sup>17</sup> Frankly, this ends up being a brilliant strategic move, which leads to Timothy and Paul, becoming a phenomenal ministry partnership for YEARS and YEARS!<sup>18 19</sup>

Acts 16:6-8 continues, “Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia [MISS ih uh], they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.” So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.”<sup>20</sup> Let’s take a quick peek at a map of their 2<sup>nd</sup> Missionary Journey. It’s **MAP #2** on the back page of this transcript. They began over by that GREEN ARROW, on the right side of our map, and went north from Antioch and then west in a large counterclockwise circle, all those YELLOW ARROWS. They will eventually end up back in Antioch by the RED ARROW. They’re now in Troas, the LITTLE WHITE ARROW on the right. This is well west of the boundaries of revisiting the towns from the 1<sup>st</sup> Missionary journey. They’ll eventually end up in Philippi, the LITTLE WHITE ARROW on the left. If God’s Spirit was PREVENTING Paul and his companions from preaching in certain places, then why do you suppose Paul even WANTED to preach there? Well, because Paul wanted to preach EVERYWHERE! And, it simply made sense to go to the next place on the map, just west of Phrygia (to Asia and Mysia). However, God had other plans for them, not because He didn’t care about the people there, but because He simply had other plans.<sup>21</sup> To put it another way, the same God who OPENED the door to the Gentiles back in Acts 14:27, is now CLOSING the door to Asia and Mysia, at least for now. Brother or Sister in Christ, you and I may indeed have the BEST INTENTIONS with our *good plans*. We may even have *gospel plans*. But, what we really NEED, are *God’s plans*.<sup>22</sup>

Verse 7 has an interesting phrase, “the Spirit of Jesus.” But Verse 6 says “the Holy Spirit,” and they seem to be being used interchangeably. Theologically, this underscores Jesus’ divinity. In other words, “The identification of the ‘Spirit of Jesus’ with the...Holy Spirit...is a clear indication that Jesus is truly God.”<sup>23 24 25</sup> Our main

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<sup>17</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *Acts: A Visual Guide*, Christian Focus Publ., Scotland, 2018, “Good News Open Hearts,” from Acts 16:1-15.

<sup>18</sup> In other words, no one was making Timothy get circumcised, but Paul thought it prudent to remove this unnecessary distraction. Ultimately, it probably also took a lot of pressure off of young Timothy, who had grown up his entire young life trapped between 2 worlds, with a Jewish mother and a Greek father.

<sup>19</sup> John Stott has a helpful summary: “Once the theological principle was firmly established, that salvation is by grace alone, and that circumcision was not required but neutral, he was prepared to adjust his practical policies.... He circumcised Timothy...out of consideration for the Jews who would be offended if he remained uncircumcised.” *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, pp. 256-257.

<sup>20</sup> Some of the maps and geographical names get a little confusing because some people prefer to use the old Hellenistic names when referring to these various locations while others prefer to use the provincial Roman names. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1857 footnote on Acts 16:7. Not to mention the fact, that for us readers 2,000 years later, we are more familiar with modern names like the country of Turkey; and the fact that Asia seems like it should refer to an entire continent, rather than just one provincial area.

<sup>21</sup> See Isaiah 55:8-9.

<sup>22</sup> This is why you’ll consistently hear me asking for prayer in the Vision 2024 Prayer Letter that God would help us to be the church that He wants us to be, There are SO many different GOOD things that we could focus on as a church, but we want to be in step with His Spirit, not just busy with “GOOD things.”

<sup>23</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 1857-1858 footnote on Acts 16:7.

focus today though, is discerning God's will. As we talked about in the introduction, God leads in LOTS of different ways. So, when "the Holy Spirit" and "the Spirit of Jesus" prevent Paul and his companions from going certain places, it's not exactly clear HOW this was communicated to them. In other words, they may have discerned God's will in any number of ways: Fasting and prayer, circumstances, a prophetic gift, an angel, etc. The text doesn't articulate this detail for us.<sup>26</sup> We aren't told expressly HOW the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of Jesus, stopped them, just that He did.

Have you ever had God stop you in your tracks, or turn you away, from what YOU thought was the right direction? To Paul, it seemed like he should preach the gospel in the provinces of Asia and Mysia.<sup>27</sup> I mean, after all, what could be wrong or bad about that? And yet, God had other plans... Even though "discerning the promptings of God's Spirit" may seem rather mystical or strange to some of us, I would urge every Christ-follower to prayerfully pay attention, if we are sensing these kinds of promptings.<sup>28</sup> Back in Acts 7:51, Stephen's fiery speech to the Sanhedrin reminded them, "...You always resist the Holy Spirit!"<sup>29</sup> So if God's Spirit is convicting us of sin, we dare not ignore that. If God's Spirit is prompting us to talk with someone or to go somewhere, we shouldn't ignore that. Now, the danger of course, with "PROMPTINGS," is that they can be incredibly SUBJECTIVE. So, it's CRITICAL that we make sure to validate that these promptings are in line with God's Word. We should also always seek input from godly mentors, when trying to discern God's will. But let's not be guilty of ignoring, or missing out on, the promptings of God's Spirit in our lives!<sup>30</sup>

God's leading becomes even clearer in Acts 16:9-10, "During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready AT ONCE to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them." Now that they'd been given clear direction, there was only one thing left to do... OBEY! It's unfortunate that oftentimes in our Christian journey, the problem is not DISCERNING God's will, but actually DOING God's will.<sup>31</sup> But that wasn't any problem at all for Paul

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<sup>24</sup> Philippians 1:19 uses the phrase "the Spirit of Jesus Christ." See also Galatians 4:6 and 1 Peter 1:11.

<sup>25</sup> Romans 8:9 agrees, "You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ."

<sup>26</sup> "The Spirit may have led in any of a number of ways: Vision, circumstances, good sense or use of the prophetic gift." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 1857-1858 footnote on Acts 16:7.

<sup>27</sup> "MISS ih uh" Severance, W. M., & Eddinger, T. (1997). In *That's easy for you to say: your quick guide to pronouncing Bible names* (p. 118). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>28</sup> There's a great hymn about this called "God Moves in a Mysterious Way."

<sup>29</sup> Consider 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22. Also read 1 Corinthians 14:29-33.

<sup>30</sup> If you'd like to learn a little more about how the Holy Spirit operates and "who" He is, request a copy of the sermon transcript, "What We Believe about the Holy Spirit," from May 7, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> **There's an interesting little nugget right here in verse 10 that would be easy to miss; it's the phrase, "WE got ready." Who's this "WE" talking about?** This WE is actually the way that Luke, the author of Acts, is letting us know that he has now joined Paul's team for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Missionary Journey. (*The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1858 footnote on Acts 16:10.) **So, you'll notice that back in verse 8, Luke was still using the pronoun "they," but now he uses WE.** "the author joins Paul briefly on the second missionary journey (verses 9-40) and rejoins him at Philippi on Paul's return from his third missionary journey (20:1-17). Luke stays with Paul at Caesarea after Paul's arrest and accompanies him to Rome (chapters 20-28)." (*The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, pp. 2252-2253 footnote on Acts 16:10.)

and his companions. They were eager to share the gospel; let us at 'em! Acts 16:11-12 continues, "From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days." Something just happened here that we could easily miss. Brother or sister in Christ, THIS IS EXCITING: the gospel, has now officially stepped... onto European soil! Praise the Lord! <sup>32</sup> ENDS OF THE EARTH, here we come!

Acts 16:13-14 goes on, "On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there."<sup>33</sup> One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." Do you happen to know where Thyatira is located? Check out our final map, **MAP #3** on the back page of this transcript. Thyatira is located in the province of Asia; it's circled in white. This is the same Asia where, back in verse 6, the Holy Spirit had kept Paul from preaching. Now isn't THAT interesting!<sup>34</sup> Verse 14 says, "...The Lord OPENED Lydia's heart to respond to Paul's message." Back in verse 6, the Holy Spirit CLOSED THE DOOR to Paul preaching in the province of Asia, Back in verse 7, the Spirit of Jesus CLOSED THE DOOR to Bithynia, and then, in verse 9, God sent Paul a vision to come and preach the gospel in MACEDONIA. You see, Philippi was in Macedonia, but more importantly, LYDIA was in Macedonia (she was FROM Thyatira, but she was IN Macedonia) and the Lord OPENED THE DOOR of her heart to the gospel! Then, she and all her household were baptized! In other words, all of these promptings by God's Spirit underscore, that God had a divine itinerary for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Missionary Journey.<sup>35</sup>

***For us Christ-followers today, this underscores the importance that we PAY ATTENTION to God's leading over against our own planning.*** God has a plan, and He knows what He's doing! Whatever method God may use, to help us discern His will for our lives, once He makes it clear, there is only one correct response: OBEDIENCE!<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Their stop in Samothrace was brief, but Samothrace is an absolutely beautiful island with a mountain peak (Mt. Fengari) almost 6,000 feet high! "Poseidon was said to watch over Troy" from there. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 532.

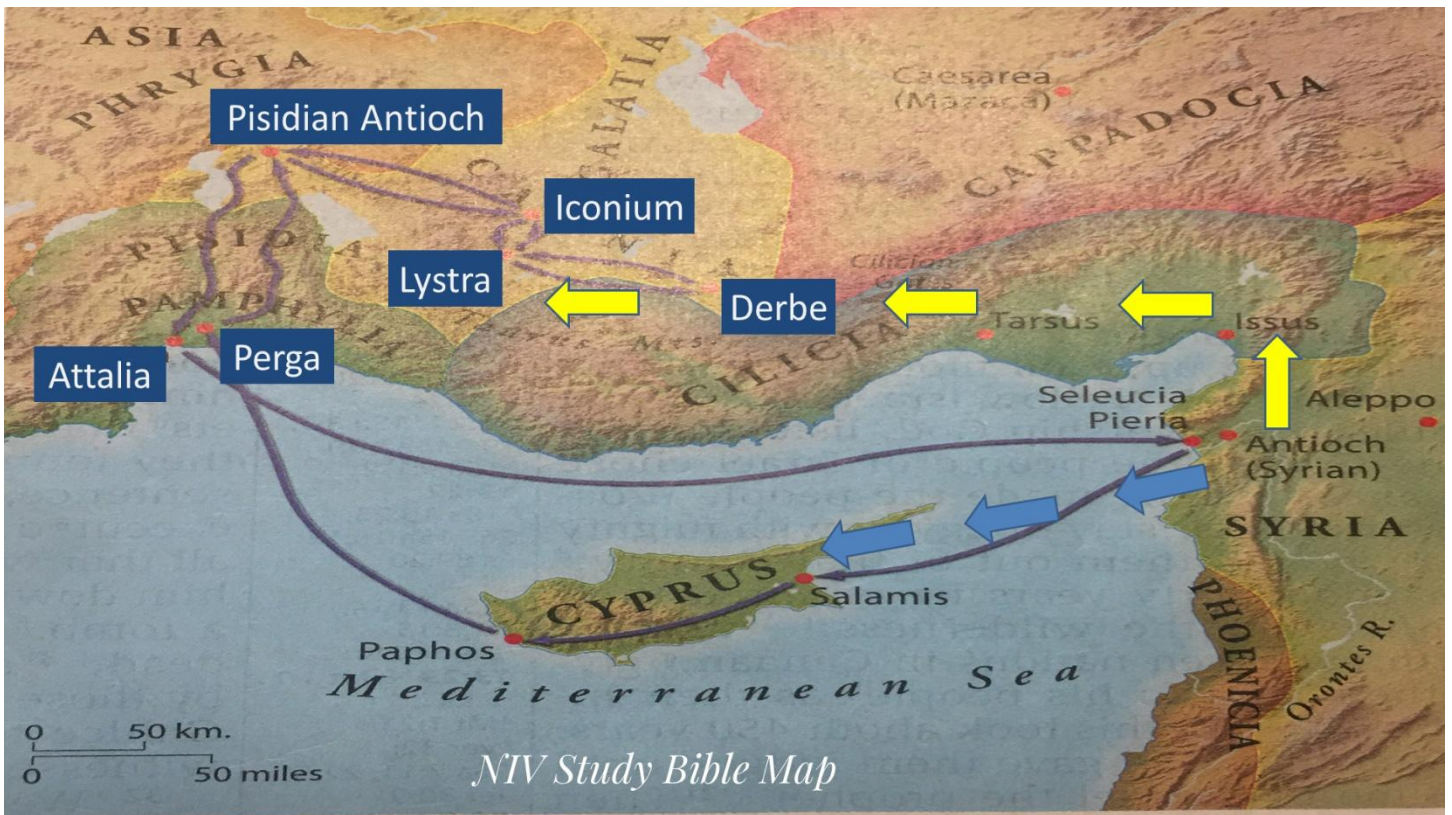
<sup>33</sup> **They expected this for at least two reasons:** First of all, apparently there were so few Jews in Philippi, that there weren't enough people to justify a formal synagogue. ("There were so few Jews in Philippi that there was no synagogue (ten married men were required), so the Jews who were there met for prayer along the banks of the Gangites River" *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1859 footnote on Acts 16:13.) Second of all, it was customary for places of prayer to be near water because it allowed for certain ceremonial washings. (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 534.)

<sup>34</sup> So even though Paul is now way over in Europe, the gospel is reaching someone from Asia. To be clear, NOT the continent of Asia, but the province of Asia, which technically was located on the continent of Asia in modern terms. (Ok, so it's not so clear!)

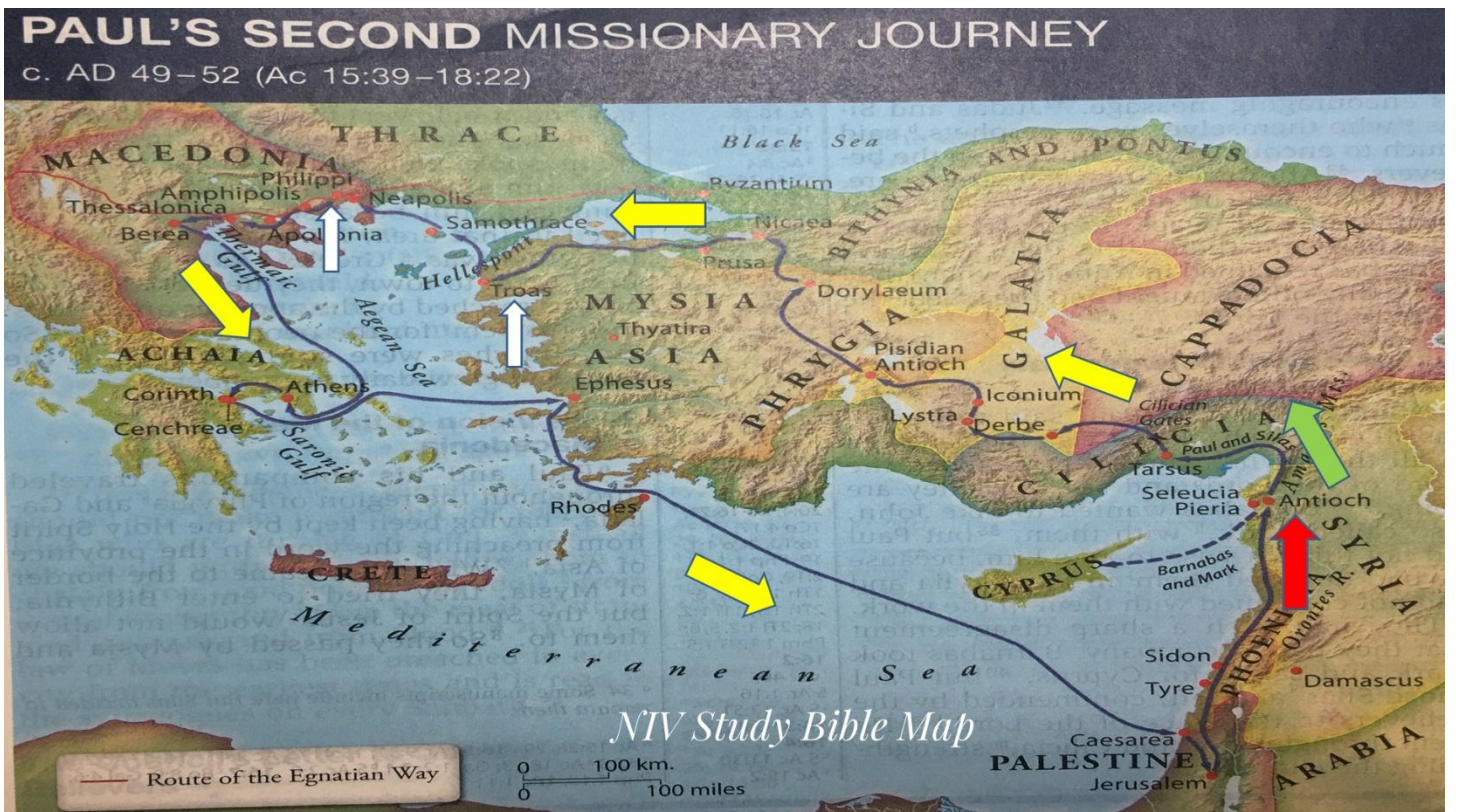
<sup>35</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 528.

<sup>36</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 528.

**MAP #1**



**MAP #2**



**MAP #3**

**PAUL'S SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY**

c. AD 49–52 (Ac 15:39–18:22)

