

When God Interrupts Your Plans

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Faith / Acts 16:6–15

There is something deeply satisfying, even exhilarating, about setting goals for our lives. When we establish a goal, we are doing more than simply deciding what we want to accomplish. We are imagining a future that does not yet exist and believing we can take meaningful steps toward making it a reality. And when opportunities begin appearing, circumstances fall into place, and what once seemed impossible suddenly becomes attainable, our excitement grows. We begin to believe that the future we have been hoping for is finally within reach. As Christians, we often interpret these opportunities as evidence of God's blessing. We pray about our future, ask the Lord to guide our decisions, and when doors begin opening, we rejoice. We confidently declare, "I prayed about this, and look what the Lord has done!" But let me ask you something. What happens when the door you believed God was opening suddenly begins to close?

Perhaps you have experienced something like that. You prayed earnestly about a particular direction for your life, and for a while everything seemed to be falling into place. But then something changed. The job you had hoped for went to someone else. A relationship you believed had a future came to an unexpected end. Your health began to deteriorate, forcing you to reconsider plans you had made years earlier. Or perhaps a ministry you genuinely believed God had called you to suddenly began moving in a direction you never anticipated. And just like that, the future you had been looking forward to no longer seemed possible. What makes these experiences particularly difficult is that sometimes there was nothing wrong with our plans. Our motives were good. Our intentions were honourable. We had prayed about them and genuinely believed we were moving in the right direction. Yet the door still

closed. And we find ourselves asking, “Lord, why? Why would You allow this door to close when everything seemed so right?”

That brings us to a remarkable account in [Acts 16](#). The apostle Paul was beginning his second missionary journey. His original intention was to revisit the churches established during his first journey and strengthen the believers in their faith. In [Acts 15:36](#), Paul proposed, “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.” As Paul and his companions travelled through the region, their ministry was bearing fruit. [Acts 16:5](#) tells us that “the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.” Everything seemed to be going well. But as Paul continued his journey, seeking to carry the gospel into new regions, something unexpected happened. [Acts 16:6](#) tells us that the Holy Spirit prevented him from preaching in the province of Asia. Then, when he attempted to enter Bithynia, the Spirit of Jesus would not allow him ([Acts 16:7](#)). Think about that for a moment. Paul wasn't running away from God or pursuing some selfish ambition. He simply wanted to preach the gospel. Yet twice, the Lord prevented him from going where he intended. Paul could not yet see what God was preparing or where this unexpected redirection would lead. All he knew was that the doors he had hoped would open were now closed. And that is where our story begins.

Good Plans are not Always God's Plans

Acts 16:6 NIV

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.

Paul had a good plan, but God had a different timetable. The Holy Spirit prevented him from preaching in the province of Asia, not because the people

there didn't need the gospel, but because God was directing Paul elsewhere at that particular time. In fact, Paul would eventually minister in Ephesus, and [Acts 19:10](#) tells us that people throughout the province of Asia heard the Word of the Lord. The door was closed for now, but it would not remain closed forever. And that reminds us of an important truth: even our best plans must remain subject to God's direction.

As Christians, we have the freedom and responsibility to make decisions about our lives, but our ambitions should reflect a desire to live in a manner “worthy of the gospel of Christ” ([Philippians 1:27](#)). We are not meant to pursue whatever seems most appealing or build our future around selfish desires ([1 John 2:16](#)). Yet even when our intentions are honourable, our understanding remains limited. We see only a small portion of the future, while God sees what lies beyond our understanding. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord reminds us:

Isaiah 55:8–9 NIV

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,

neither are your ways My ways,”

declares the LORD.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are My ways higher than your ways

and My thoughts than your thoughts.

If we are to walk faithfully along the path God intends for us, we need more than good intentions and careful planning. We need His wisdom and guidance. Scripture reminds us that our desires do not always align with the Spirit's leading ([Galatians 5:17](#)). Even plans that appear good and reasonable may not

accomplish what God intends for us. [Proverbs 19:21](#) reminds us that although many plans may fill a person's heart, it is the Lord's purpose that ultimately prevails. That is why we must allow God's Word to illuminate our path, shape our desires, and guide our decisions.

Now, this does not mean that God wants us to abandon planning or simply wait for life to unfold. Human initiative is an important part of faithful obedience [1]. We should exercise wisdom, pursue worthwhile goals, and make responsible decisions, but always with a humble recognition of God's sovereignty. Solomon expresses this beautifully in [Proverbs 3:5-6](#):

Proverbs 3:5-6 NIV

Trust in the LORD with all your heart

and lean not on your own understanding;

in all your ways submit to Him,

and He will make your paths straight.

But trusting God involves more than asking Him to bless the plans we have already made. It requires a willingness to change those plans when His direction becomes clear. James reminds us that we do not know what tomorrow will bring and that our plans must remain subject to the Lord's will ([James 4:13-15](#)). God's Word and prayer are essential means of discerning His will [2]. Through Scripture, we come to understand God's character, His commands, and the principles by which He calls us to live [3]. Through prayer, we bring our plans before Him, seeking not merely His blessing upon our decisions, but the humility to align our desires with His purposes [4]. The goal is not to persuade God to follow our plans, but to become willing to follow His.

And this is where following God can become particularly challenging. It is one thing to seek His guidance when we are uncertain about the future. It is quite

another to have invested years of effort, prayer, and sacrifice into a particular goal, only to discover that the direction we have been pursuing may need to change. We may have built our expectations around that future, believing that because our motives were good, our plans must surely be God's plans as well. Yet when circumstances change, we can struggle to surrender the very future we had asked God to bless. Sometimes the greatest challenge is not discovering God's direction, but being willing to accept it when it differs from our own. That brings us back to Paul. His desire to preach the gospel in Asia was honourable, but he could not allow even that good desire to become more important than following the Holy Spirit. The same must be true of us. We should make plans, pursue worthwhile goals, and use the opportunities God has given us, but we must hold those plans with open hands. We must be willing to say, "Lord, this is the future I have been working toward, but if You have another direction for my life, help me to trust You enough to follow." The question is not simply whether we have invited God into our plans, but whether we are willing to let Him change them.

Sometimes God Leads by Closing Doors

Acts 16:7-8 NIV

When they came to the border of Mysia, 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.

But surrendering our plans to God is one thing; recognizing His direction when those plans begin to unravel is another. Having been prevented from preaching in the province of Asia, Paul and his companions travelled toward Mysia and attempted to enter Bithynia. Yet [Acts 16:7](#) tells us that "the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to." Rather than continuing north into Bithynia, they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas ([Acts 16:8](#)). The Holy Spirit was directing their missionary journey, first preventing them from preaching in Asia

and then keeping them from entering Bithynia [5]. Paul had encountered two closed doors, but his ministry was far from over. And this was certainly not the first time God had intervened in the plans of His people. When Balaam travelled along a path that displeased the Lord, an angel stood in his way until he recognized God's warning ([Numbers 22:22–35](#)). When David sought refuge in Keilah, he inquired of the Lord whether its citizens would surrender him to Saul. God revealed that they would, and David departed before Saul could capture him ([1 Samuel 23:1–14](#)). In both accounts, God's intervention changed the direction of someone's journey, but for different reasons. Balaam was confronted with the danger of his reckless conduct, while David was protected from falling into the hands of his enemy. God's guidance does not always come through opportunities that open before us. Sometimes it comes through warnings or restrictions that cause us to reconsider our direction.

But here is something we need to understand. Not every closed door means we have done something wrong, and not every obstacle means God is telling us to abandon our plans. Sometimes difficulties are part of the path of obedience, and God calls us to persevere through them. Yet there are also times when, in His wisdom, He redirects our steps toward purposes we cannot yet see [6]. And perhaps that is what makes closed doors so difficult to accept. We want God to explain what He is doing, reassure us that everything will work out, and preferably show us the next open door before the present one closes. But that is not always how He leads. Paul did not yet know about the vision awaiting him in Troas or the people he would eventually meet in Macedonia. For the moment, he simply had to continue faithfully with the direction God had given him. And the same principle applies to us. When a cherished opportunity disappears or a carefully considered plan becomes impossible, our first response may be disappointment or confusion. But rather than assuming that God has abandoned us, we can bring those circumstances before Him in prayer, examine our plans in the light of His Word, and seek the wisdom to recognize whether He is calling us to persevere or change direction. Sometimes God's greatest

guidance is not found in the door He opens, but in the one He lovingly prevents us from entering.

God's Direction Often Becomes Clear One Step at a Time

Acts 16:9 NIV

During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

But knowing where God does not want us to go is not the same as knowing where He wants us to go. Paul had encountered two closed doors, yet the Lord had not revealed his next destination. And as we are about to discover, God does not always reveal the entire journey at once. Sometimes He gives us just enough direction to take the next step. But during the night, Paul received a vision of a Macedonian man pleading for help. What had previously been uncertain now became clear. [Acts 16:10](#) tells us that Paul and his companions concluded that God had called them to preach the gospel in Macedonia. The closed doors had not been the end of God's guidance; they had been part of the journey toward a new direction [7].

When we examine Scripture, we discover that God frequently reveals His direction gradually rather than all at once. One reason may be that He uses the journey itself to develop our faith, teaching us to depend upon His wisdom rather than our own understanding [8]. If God revealed every detail of the future, we might be tempted to place our confidence in the plan rather than in the One who directs our steps. Instead, He calls us to trust Him with what we know today, even when tomorrow remains uncertain. God's purposes extend beyond our limited understanding, and we cannot always see how the individual steps fit into His greater plan [9]. Consider Abraham. God told him to leave his country and go to a land He would show him ([Genesis 12:1](#)). [Hebrews 11:8](#) tells us that Abraham obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

He did not need to know the entire journey before taking the first step of obedience.

And perhaps one of the most beautiful pictures of this principle is found in [Psalm 119:105](#): “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.” Notice that the psalmist describes God's Word as a lamp, not a floodlight illuminating the entire road ahead. A lamp provides enough light to see where to place our next step, but it does not necessarily reveal everything waiting farther down the road. In much the same way, God calls us to walk faithfully according to the light He has already given us. We may not know where every decision will lead or how our circumstances will unfold, but we can trust that His wisdom is greater than ours. Faith does not require us to know everything the future holds; it requires us to trust the One who holds our future. And perhaps that is where some of us find ourselves today. We know which doors have closed, but we cannot yet see where God is leading. We want answers, explanations, and reassurance about what lies ahead. Yet Paul's experience reminds us that uncertainty does not mean God has stopped working. The same Lord who prevented Paul from going into Bithynia was preparing to direct him toward Macedonia. Sometimes God does not reveal the next step until we have faithfully followed Him as far as we can see.

God's Redirection may Look Different than we Expected

Acts 16:11-14 NIV

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.

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. 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.

When Paul received the vision of a Macedonian man pleading for help, imagine what he might have expected. Perhaps he anticipated crowds eager to hear the gospel or opportunities greater than those he had been prevented from pursuing in Asia. After all, God had specifically directed him to Macedonia. Surely something remarkable was waiting for him there! Yet when Paul arrived in Philippi, he encountered something quite different. There was apparently no synagogue, likely because the Jewish community was too small to support one [10]. Instead, Paul and his companions went outside the city to a riverside gathering where several women had assembled for prayer. There, rather than addressing a great crowd, Paul began speaking with a small group of women [11].

Among them was Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth and a worshiper of God. As Paul shared the gospel, something extraordinary happened. [Acts 16:14](#) tells us that "the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." Paul faithfully proclaimed the Word, but it was God who brought about the response [12]. Lydia believed, and she and her household were baptized ([Acts 16:15](#)). Think about the significance of that moment. Paul had travelled hundreds of kilometres, encountered two closed doors, and crossed the sea into Macedonia. Yet the first conversion Luke records in Philippi was not before a great assembly, but beside a river, where God opened one woman's heart. Paul was looking for an open door, but God led him to an open heart. And perhaps there is an important lesson here for us. We sometimes measure God's leading by the size of the opportunity, while God may be directing us toward the significance of one person. Perhaps you have prayed for opportunities to share the gospel but feel that no doors are opening. Yet what if the opportunity God has placed before you is already sitting across the table? It might be a colleague who questions your faith, a neighbour who needs someone to listen, or a family member

struggling to find direction. What appears ordinary to us may become an opportunity for God to accomplish something extraordinary.

Throughout Scripture, we see God redirecting individuals toward purposes they could not initially understand [13]. Paul's experience reminds us that God's plans do not always unfold as we imagine. We may be looking for something impressive, while God is preparing an encounter that seems almost insignificant. The question is not whether the opportunity looks as great as we expected, but whether we are willing to be faithful with the opportunity God has placed before us.

Conclusion: What Looks Like an Interruption May be the Beginning of Something Greater

As we come to the end of this message, I want you to notice something remarkable about Paul's journey. What began with two closed doors eventually led to something far greater than Paul could have imagined. When he arrived in Philippi, he met a woman named Lydia beside a river. [Acts 16:14](#) tells us that the Lord opened her heart to respond to the gospel. Then, in [Acts 16:15](#), we read that Lydia and her household were baptized, and she welcomed Paul and his companions into her home. What began with one woman's conversion was already becoming something more.

Later, after Paul and Silas had been imprisoned and released, [Acts 16:40](#) tells us that they returned to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Think about that. A conversation beside a river had become a gathering of believers. And years later, Paul would write to the church at Philippi, saying, "I thank my God every time I remember you," because of their "partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" ([Philippians 1:3-5](#)). This was a church that would continue to support Paul's ministry and share in the work of spreading the gospel ([Philippians 4:15-16](#)). And where did it all

begin? With two closed doors. Paul wanted to preach in Asia and Bithynia, but God had another direction for him. Paul could not see Lydia waiting beside that river. He could not foresee the Philippian jailer coming to faith ([Acts 16:29–34](#)), or the church that would grow in that city. But God knew. What appeared to be an interruption was part of something much greater. And perhaps that is where this message meets us today. Maybe a door has closed in your life, and you are struggling to understand why. Perhaps you have invested years in a future that now seems uncertain. You prayed, made plans, and genuinely believed you were following God's direction. Yet things have not unfolded as you expected.

Remember what we have learned from Paul. Good plans are not always God's plans. A closed door does not necessarily mean God has abandoned you. And you do not need to see the entire journey to take the next step of obedience. [Proverbs 3:5–6](#) reminds us to trust in the Lord with all our hearts rather than lean on our own understanding. We may never fully understand why certain doors closed. Nor can we assume that every disappointment will lead to something greater in this life. But we can trust the wisdom and faithfulness of the God who sees what we cannot see. So whatever future you are facing today, bring it before the Lord. Hold your plans with open hands. Remain faithful to what He has already revealed in His Word, and trust Him with what you cannot yet understand. Because a closed door does not mean God has stopped leading. Sometimes it means He is redirecting us toward something we cannot yet see.

Footnotes

[1] S. N. Williams, “Providence,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 714.

[2] Kim Boyce Koreiba, *Not Too Far From Here: Moving from Hurt to Hope* (BroadStreet Publishing Group, LLC, 2015).

- [3] Jack Graham, *The Jesus Book: Reading and Understanding the Bible for Yourself* (Bethany House, 2024), 105–107.
- [4] Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 20.
- [5] Stephen Pimentel, *Envoy of the Messiah: On Acts of the Apostles 16–28* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2005), 6.
- [6] Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 193.
- [7] Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission & 2* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 1125–1126.
- [8] R. L. Solberg, *Torahism: Are Christians Required to Keep the Law of Moses?* (Franklin, TN: Williamson College Press, 2022), 33.
- [9] Chris Tiegreen, *The One Year Hearing His Voice Devotional: 365 Days of Intimate Communication with God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2014), 33.
- [10] Ciprian-Flavius Terinte, “Acts,” in *Central and Eastern European Bible Commentary*, ed. Corneliu Constantineanu and Peter Penner (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2022), 1266.
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] Ajith Fernando, *Acts, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 444.
- [13] . I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom, *God’s Will: Finding Guidance for Everyday Decisions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 182.