



# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## I Know the Wind

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There's a funny trend on social media right now all about missing the mark. It stems from an interview conducted a few weeks ago with a random Peruvian man who was shown a picture of the new pope (who you may recall lived in Peru) and asked what his thoughts were. The man and the interviewer got lost in translation, because the man was incredulous that the guy in the picture, who he knew from a line dancing class, was now the pope! He didn't get it. The interviewer kept referring to the former Robert Prevost as "Pope Leo," to which the man responded, "what do you mean? That's just Bob from dance class!" This has prompted people to comment on similar thoughts about famous people, humorously overlooking why they're most famous. *Do you mean Ronald Reagan, the actor? Bruce Wayne, the billionaire? Oh, Donald Trump, the guy from The Apprentice? Jesus? Honey, they crucified our carpenter!*

I have added one more. *The Holy Spirit. Do you mean the flame from Pentecost?* To many of us, this is who the Spirit is, an unknown force which showed up fifty days after Easter and led the Apostles to inaugurate the church. But is that it? Do we view the Spirit as more of an annual reminder than a constant friend? In truth, to call the Spirit "the flame from Pentecost" would indeed be like saying Jesus was simply just a carpenter. For most of us, our primary relationship with the Holy Spirit has been misunderstanding who He is and what He does. Let's get to know Him a bit more.

I'd like to spend some time talking about one of the Spirit's most important roles, one as relevant for the first Apostles in the Book of

Acts as for us today: guiding us in discernment. To “discern” means to search for and sniff out God’s will for a situation, and for our lives. This is Christian *decision making*. Each of us have important decisions to make every day. Which one is weighing on your mind today? Whether to downsize your houses Whether to switch jobs or to retire? Whether to take the next step in a relationship? Whether to make an important health or lifestyle change? Whether to walk away from a difficult friendship? Something else entirely?

We all want to make these decisions according to God’s will. And fortunately, Jesus promised us the Spirit’s help in this. Easier said than done though, right? It can be difficult to invite the Holy Spirit into our process of discernment and to see His presence in it. Let’s try to change that. We’ll do so by walking through one example of Spirit-led discernment in the book of Acts, hoping it can help us, too.

Allow me to set the scene. Around 20 years after Pentecost, the Apostle Paul was eager to hit the road spreading the Gospel, and he knew just where to start. His idea was to head to the Roman province of Asia - not to be confused with our modern-day Asia. Roman Asia was the province that extended over the eastern coast of the Aegean Sea. Paul was certain that the best way to reach the Gentile world was to trek there. He’s ready to go. Our text today documents this long-awaited trip to Asia. We’ll be reading from Acts 16:6-11 in three blocks. Let’s see how this awesome adventure begins:

<sup>6</sup>Next Paul and Silas traveled through the area of Phrygia and Galatia, because the Holy Spirit had prevented them from preaching the word in the province of Asia at that time. (Acts 16:6)

Let me get this straight. Paul, certain of Asia’s potential, was prevented by the Holy Spirit from heading there. We don’t know why. It doesn’t even say how the Spirit spoke to Paul or what His voice sounded like. The process of hearing the Spirit is similarly murky for you. I wonder if the reason Luke leaves the explanation vague is to encourage us to probe Paul and reconstruct his blueprint for discern-

ment - a few key steps we can use to see how the Spirit might be speaking to us.

First, start with what you know. C.S. Lewis said that “to approach the mystery of what is unknown, we can begin with what is known.” It’s true that God chose to keep Scripture vague about the Spirit because our job is to know Him by experiencing Him, not just by reading about Him. And yet, there’s a lot to read - much more than we realize!

Here are just some of the things we know about the Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit is God - the third Person of the Trinity - as well as a divine person with a mind, emotions, and will. Scripture tells us that the Spirit knows both our thoughts and God’s thoughts and can feel sorrow. This personal nature is necessary for the Spirit to be our Comforter and Counselor, as Jesus promised He would be.

Far from being an aloof, distant force, the Spirit is deeply involved in our lives. He is God’s creativity manifest. He was active in the formation of the world, and He gives us spiritual gifts according to His will, which empower us to serve the Kingdom. Our relationship with the Spirit is ongoing and critical to our Christian walk. He advocates for us, prays for us, gives us wisdom, strengthens us, and dwells within us. Our bodies are His temple, and His power enables us to fulfill the Great Commission - the first evidence of that being at Pentecost.

What else do we know? There are a few non-negotiables for any Spirit-led discernment process, and they’re reminders that we all need to hear from time to time. Specifically, that the best avenue for discernment is prayer and Scripture. God has given us His Word to guide and direct us. God’s Word is the best source for knowing God’s Will - especially when His will seems elusive. It’s in this act of diving into God’s Word that we find our next piece of advice: become fluent.

Paul was extremely interested in understanding the Spirit. Importantly, Paul didn’t expect the Spirit to do all the heavy lifting! He

wasn't just open to the Spirit's guidance - he took responsibility for learning how to understand it. Discernment becomes so much easier when you speak the Spirit's language.

A few months ago, I visited Iceland with my mom. At one point, we were driving and unsure of where we were. We were relieved to see a big road sign ahead - at last, some direction!



Here's a fun fact you may not know about me: I don't speak Icelandic. So that sign was useless to me. I knew it meant something, probably something important - but it was meaningless, because we spoke different languages, the sign and me.

The Holy Spirit speaks a language, too. Galatians spell it out for us, saying the Holy Spirit is fluent in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.  
(Galatians 5:22-23)

That's the native tongue of the Spirit. If you're attempting to read the road signs of life in our native human language of frustration, impatience, greed, or selfishness, it'll be about as good as an English-speaker trying to make out an Icelandic map. Paul was fluent in the Spirit's language because he had reoriented his entire life - his values, his purpose, his very identity - to match it. He didn't let personal ambition or comfort drive him. Instead, the foundation of his every decision was one question: *does this glorify God?* When you're pon-

dering a decision, what posture do you bring? Anxiety, or peace? Anger, or love? Are you motivated by what feels good to you, or by what best serves God and others?

Here's the thing: God will never guide us into a decision that conflicts with His values and commands. When weighing your options, always make that your first consideration: do any of these choices *not* honor God? Do any go against His laws? Anytime our motivation for a decision is rooted in deceit, coveting, a lie, or a big ego, we're not making the right choice. Jesus said:

<sup>13</sup> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own but will tell you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future. (John 16:13)

This is important for us. What the Spirit tells us about the future is based on what He has heard from God the Father! The Spirit always acts according to God's sense of justice and mercy. In other words, He'll never lead you against God's will. And when it's truly God's will you're pursuing, the map finally starts to make sense.

Many of us wonder how to tell when a thought or idea is from God or just ourselves. I like to think of it this way. The Holy Spirit is often described like a river; when we're in step with Him, speaking His language, we are in His flow. And in that flow, God can and will use all our intellectual and emotional capacities - our thoughts, feelings, and even our instincts, to communicate the rightness or wrongness of a direction. When our purposes and long-term goals are aligned with God's purposes and the Spirit's language, we can dare to trust that our thoughts and emotions may just reflect His leading.

But what if we don't like that leading? This raises an important third step, one many of us struggle with: be content with God's will - no matter what. Submitting to the Spirit means understanding and accepting that my will and God's will may conflict. How we respond to this truth is a vital window into our faith.

Remember, the Spirit didn't tell Paul where to go - only *not* to go to Asia. There's a key point here about attitudes - you'll notice that Paul had no desire to override the Spirit. Even though he may have disagreed or struggled to understand the guidance he was receiving, he chose to trust it, rather than substitute his own judgement. In the face of the slammed door to Asia, Paul simply continued moving to new cities in Galatia. He just does what he was planning to do - spread the Gospel - right where he was. This will be the course of action for the person who has surrendered their mind to God's use.

Eventually, the Spirit speaks again. Let's read the next portion of our text:

<sup>7</sup>Then coming to the borders of Mysia, they headed north for the province of Bithynia, but again the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go there. <sup>8</sup>So instead, they went on through Mysia to the seaport of Troas.

(Acts 16:7-8)

Once more, Paul is on the move - this time, northeast into Bithynia. The Spirit, once more, does not allow him. And here's some salt in that wound: the original Greek, the first redirection - away from Asia - is written in the past tense, suggesting the guidance came in advance of the trip. But this second "no" is in the present tense, meaning Paul and his team were nearly to the border when the Spirit stopped them. It was a door slammed shut in real time. This must have been a frustrating moment. They had already traveled a long distance and were tired, uncertain, and wondering if they'd misread God's will entirely.

Paul could have given up or grown bitter when his plans didn't align with God's. But instead, he chose to stay attentive. And that changed everything. With the road to Bithynia blocked, only one direction remained: west, toward the coastal city of Troas. The Spirit had slowly narrowed the options, guiding Paul not by a sudden sign but by a kind of holy process of elimination.

My friends, our God has a notoriously glorious track record of turning our moments of great uncertainty into crystal-clear purpose. When you're struggling to find direction and feel that you're simply "caught in the wind," consider instead that you're "firm in the flow." The Spirit's intended direction may not emerge immediately, but that doesn't mean He isn't guiding you.

In this process of noes and yeses, Paul learned our next piece of advice all too well: know that revelation comes in many forms. Let me make a confession to you: I don't like ambiguity. In searching for clarity, I'd much rather God send me an angelic messenger, so I'd know what to say and do for the rest of my life. Is anyone with me on that? And yet, it isn't always so.

We've established that the Spirit will make our direction known to us if we trust Him. But *how* that direction becomes known is different for everyone. Let's read our final portion of the text, with Paul now in Troas:

<sup>9</sup>That night Paul had a vision: A man from Macedonia in northern Greece was standing there, pleading with him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" <sup>10</sup> So we decided to leave for Macedonia at once, having concluded that God was calling us to preach the Good News there. (Acts 16:9-10)

What an interesting method of communication: a man in a dream. When Paul awoke, clarity surely overtook him. He knew that those last few months of closed doors had been for a purpose. Our human instincts are such that self-centered tunnel vision can easily overtake us. But remember: God's plans and purposes aren't always about us. This long, winding road of Paul's was never about him. Rather, it was necessary for the work God would do through him for others. If you feel like you're on a similarly long road, the same may be true for you. The pit stops and detours may be an unwelcomed diversion for you, but vital moments for who you'd least expect.

The Greek word that's used to describe the moment of Paul's realization is *sumbibazontes*, which translates to "concluding." It means to coalesce, to bind or knit together, to see the way things agree, pointing to a direction. The dream - the call from Macedonia - was both a revelation and a confirmation of a growing conviction. The Spirit's guidance often works this way: when you feel confident in a decision, it may be a sudden realization, or a quiet assurance for something that has long pointed in one direction, or a combination of these things.

Or it's something else. But know this: it's not always an angelic messenger. It's usually not. As Paul's story proves, God often fashions our direction through closed doors. Notice how the Spirit, at different points in the text, tells Paul both to stop *and* go.

If you've ever signed a contract before, you've encountered a "force majeure" clause. Which is a provision freeing the signatories from their obligations in the event of an unforeseen act beyond normal human control, like a hurricane or a war. Back in earlier days of the church, a similar phrase was often used in governing documents as a provision to safeguard against divine redirection, and it was these three words: *unless providentially hindered*. Man, do I love that phrase. How many of us can say that we've been providentially hindered before? I certainly can.

Some of you know my story. When I was in college, the only thing I was sure about was escaping Florida, and *fast*. There was no specific reason for this, but soaking armpits were certainly a motivation. Plus, I'd lived in Fort Myers my whole life and reasoned that I just needed to be somewhere else. As I graduated, this plan was firm and secure. I'd head to seminary in person at a school 1,200 miles away.

I was providentially hindered. God began speaking to me through close friends and mentors. I realized that this was *not* His will for me. I withdrew just one month before classes began. This left me without a clear sense of direction, and that was difficult. In front of me was a hallway of closed doors. And then, out of nowhere, one

creaked open - in the form of Pastor Brad offering me a job here. I accepted, believing it would be a short-term thing. Then, once again, I was providentially hindered. God slowly and surely hindered me from leaving by giving me an amazing Christian community of young adults whom I've grown to treasure, with a spiritual depth I've never experienced before, and thousands of loving and caring friends - that's you - who have renewed and restored my sense of purpose. Now, just a few years out from college, I can't think of any place I'd rather be. God hindered me, so I could be with you - and I wouldn't have it any other way. It's as if He'd been planning that all along. How has God hindered you?

You may not know how the Spirit will guide you, but you can be sure that the Spirit *will* guide you. Sometimes, it's through the gentle elimination of other options. Sometimes, it's a sudden or shocking change. Sometimes, it's quiet whispers that pile up into a loud roar. And sometimes, the Spirit speaks through others. On Pentecost, this birthday of the church, let's never forget that truth, my friends: you do not have to discern alone! Decisions are meant to be made in community, with close Christian friends who will help you sense the Spirit at work. Decisions are seldom an individual exercise; our steps from today can, and should, be used with others, as Paul did with his companions on his journey. Our Christian unity is our great strength in sensing the Spirit.

This brings us to our final tip from Paul. Trust that God's way is better. Paul's disappointment was strengthened by his understanding that the Spirit's *noes* were part of a greater, eventual *yes*. God simply sees things we can't through our human blinders. Paul knew that, even if he didn't understand it, the Spirit had a plan. Paul just had to be patient.

In Paul's unexpected swerve to Troas, something happened. He met a Greek man who joined the missionaries on their journey. If not for the Spirit's redirection, the two never would've met. The man's name was Luke, the author of our text, and the person whose writings provide history's most important biographical details to prove

the movement and growth of the early church. This story marks the pivotal point in Acts when the pronouns change from “they” to “we.” Secondhand reports become eyewitness accounts. Luke continued with Paul for the rest of his life. The Spirit’s way is always better.

This story isn’t about what the Spirit did - it’s about who the Spirit is, and how God works in perfect unity. Consider this for a moment. Our text today, only five verses long, speaks of three points of clarity for Paul. Three times God guides. And all three of them refer to a different person of the Trinity. The *Holy Spirit* prevents them from traveling to Asia. The *Spirit of Jesus* stops them from going to Bithynia. And finally, *God the Father* implants the crucial vision from Macedonia. This is not a careless interchange of descriptions. This is an affirmation of what Pentecost is all about - that the Trinity is in lockstep. That same Holy Spirit from 30 AD is alive and working in you today. He is not an isolated or unimportant player. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit conspire in unity to direct and illustrate your life for God’s glory.

So, will you receive it? Are you firm in the flow? When we bring prayerful minds and willing hearts, we’ll be carried by the currents of the Great Crystallizer into the right choices.

We know that the Spirit has joyously assumed the responsibility of guiding us. I like to think He volunteered to the Father and the Son in their meeting - *I’d love that job!* As we learn to recognize His voice and see God’s hand in all things, clarity will follow. And in this, we can humbly rejoice that we were created able to be guided - not to rely on our own wisdom or pretend we can figure it all out alone. You may know this verse:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart;  
do not depend on your own understanding.  
Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which  
path to take. (Proverbs 3:5-6)

It’s really that simple. In John 3, Jesus speaks of hearing the wind

blow and knowing the wind is present just by its sound. So, my friends be still. What do you hear?

The Holy Spirit feels hard to understand sometimes - for all of us, pastors included. We feel like we don't know Him and, therefore, can't trust Him. But here's the thing: you *do* know the Spirit. You may not think you do, but you do.

<sup>11</sup>We boarded a boat at Troas and sailed straight across to the island of Sam-a-thrice, and the next day we landed at Neapolis. (Acts 16:11)

Don't miss this; the words "sailed straight across," in Greek, are not superfluous. Luke, the mastermind of nautical language, is making clear that now, the wind was at their backs. The Spirit, who has functioned thus far as the headwind against the bow of their human ideas about where to go, was now filling their sails. A straight course...out ahead of the wind, with a following sea.

The Spirit comes in many forms. But wind seems to be one of His favorites. And I understand why - because wind is a great friend to have, especially when sailing the seas of life, looking for direction. If you're willing to speak His language, trust His plan no matter what, and act upon it when the answer becomes clear, you won't just feel the wind - you'll *know* the wind.

Think of what a daring, audacious, comforting, truth that is: *I know the wind*. The wind that created the earth, the wind that calls saints into action, the wind that birthed the church, the wind that changed the world, the wind that breathes life into death - *He* is my guide, my strength, my compass.



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