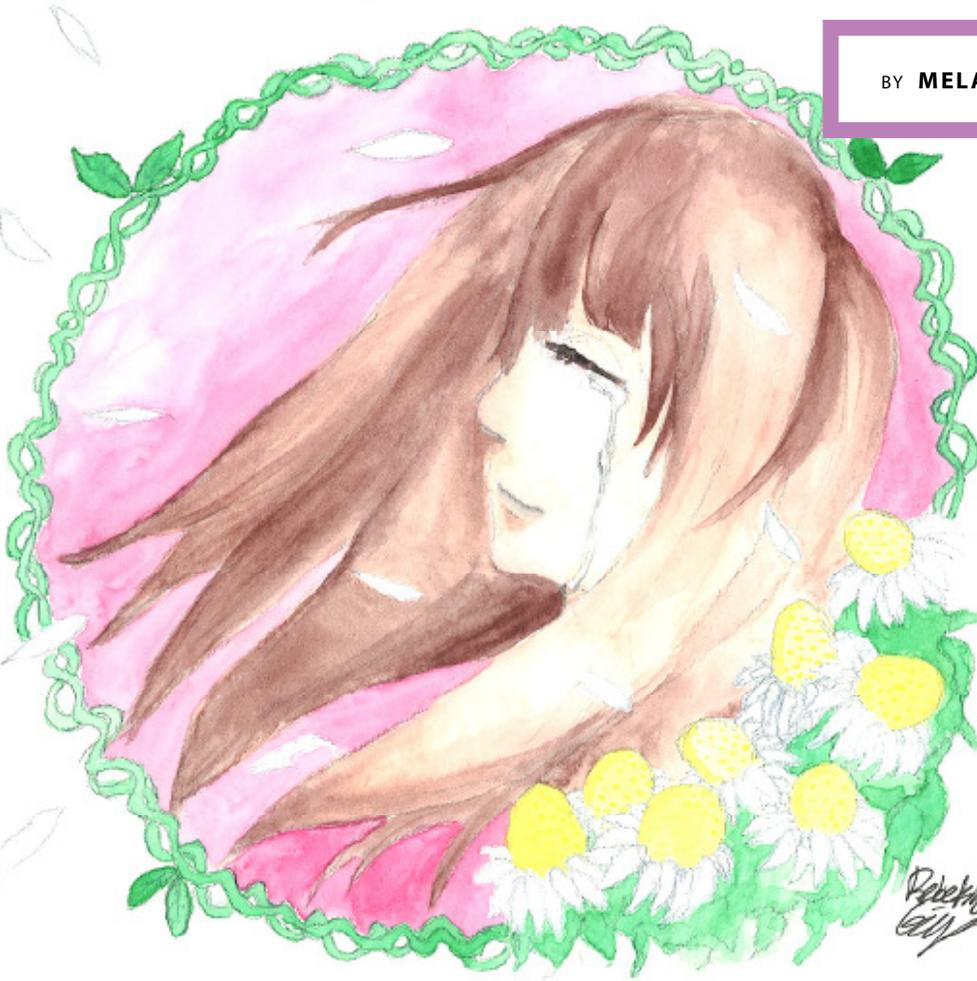


BY MELANIE HOWARD

Illustration by Rebekah Geiger



# *Gentle Resilience*

## **A reflection on Acts 16:6-10**

**T**hey went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.—Acts 16:6-7

Wet from a shower in which I had been brooding over my shortcomings, I stood sobbing

in the middle of my kitchen, tears mixing with the water dripping off my bangs. “I can’t do it,” I wailed to my husband. I was in the midst of applying to doctoral programs, but rather than celebrating the many educational opportunities I had already received, I was despairing over what I imagined were too-low test scores and unimpressive personal statements. I was ready to throw in the towel.

Shortly after this soggy setback, I heard a sermon on Acts 16:6-10 that examined an unusual event in the Apostle Paul’s missionary journeys: a divine intervention that turned him away from potential missionary activity. The sermon highlighted Paul’s perseverance in the face of thwarted opportunities, and it gave me the push I needed to complete the application that would land me in just the right

doctoral program. Since then, I have returned to this text several times to find a model for spiritual resilience that is even more robust than what I had originally imagined.

The opening of Acts 16 looks like the beginning of a recipe for success: Paul has been collecting an impressive track record on a missionary circuit of several hundred miles (Acts 15:41), and he has acquired a promising new partner, Timothy (16:1-3). Their combined efforts yield remarkable results (16:5), and the partners carry on in their work, traveling several hundred more miles. All signs point to success—until they don't.

Acts 16:6-7 narrates the story so quickly it is easy to miss the significance of what occurs. Paul and Timothy have traversed (likely on foot or on rudimentary animal-driven transportation) several hundred miles, journeys that would have taken them weeks. Yet when they reach what has seemingly been the journey's destination, Bithynia, their efforts are thwarted. The narrator of this tale passes over this moment quickly, but after weeks of hard travel, these missionaries were likely far more affected than what these two verses suggest. I imagine Paul and Timothy may have been in utter despair. Just as they think they have been doing the Lord's work, they are stopped in their tracks by none other than the "Spirit of Jesus" (16:7).

The text does not provide a narration of the missionaries' personal reflections at this point. Indeed, their emotional reactions may not have been known to anyone but themselves. Nonetheless, I can imagine my own response to this seeming

setback: disappointment, sadness, frustration, resignation. The text does not elaborate on Paul and Timothy's feelings, but it does sketch out their next action: They keep going (16:8).

What, then, is the model of spiritual resilience Paul and Timothy provide? At first, it seems to suggest a certain spiritual "stick-to-it-iveness," and in a sense, this is true. Paul and Timothy stick to their mission, despite the unexpected divine intervention that sends them in a different direction. However, this view of spiritual resilience is in some ways lacking. Seen in this light, spiritual resilience becomes barely distinguishable from a spiritualized "American dream" whereby true heroes are able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and persevere.

The resilience Paul and Timothy demonstrate, however, goes beyond these trite expressions of perseverance. It is instead a manifestation of an openness to the unpredictable movements of the Spirit (Greek: *pneuma*). In fact, it is telling that the Greek term often translated "spirit" is the same word that underlies the English term "wind." Wind is inherently unpredictable. Indeed, the Fourth Gospel depicts Jesus commenting on this unpredictability while playing on the linguistic ambiguity of the term *pneuma* when speaking to Nicodemus about the Spirit/wind blowing wherever it desires (John 3:8). Thus, the image of the Spirit that emerges is not one of a solid tree that perseveres no matter what. Rather, it is the image of a gentle breeze that is free to dance with branches and leaves as it whispers through the air.

Paul and Timothy's spiritual

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resilience, then, should be seen in this light. The missionaries demonstrate their resilience by attending to the unpredictable direction of the Spirit's leading, even when that leading comes after the expenditure of significant resources in pursuit of what turns out to be a dead end. Their resilience is made manifest in their ability to let themselves, like soft leaves, be blown by the unpredictable winds of the Spirit.

I have much to learn from Paul and Timothy. My own doubts about whether I could accomplish the solitary educational goal I had set for myself reveal a mind that is more set in its own ways than open to the gentle breezes of God's Spirit. What if the Spirit had told me, like Paul and Timothy, not to go any further? What if the Spirit did the same for the church today? The model in Acts 16 suggests that spiritual resilience is not simply the ability to persevere despite setbacks. This is a gentle spiritual resilience that models the willingness to hold plans lightly so that the wind of the Spirit can blow where it wills.



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