



Toward Bold Faithfulness



A Journey
Toward **Bold Faithfulness**

Acts 16:6-10

ADULT BIBLE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

This Bible study has been designed for use in congregations as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship launches **Toward Bold Faithfulness: Discovering and Responding to God's Call Together**. In January 2020, we are inviting members of all congregations in relationship with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to participate in this strategic discovery process through prayer, study and participation in an online survey designed to allow us to listen to God's call for our life together. After prayerful discovery, as a Fellowship, we will respond boldly with faithful confidence to the compelling future God is preparing for us.

These resources contain a prayer experience that has already been used by Cooperative Baptist Fellowship leaders as we have designed and begun this process. It is a prayerful reflection on Acts 16:6-10. Additionally, commentary and reflections on the Acts 16 text that can be used in Sunday school classes, midweek Bible Studies, or as aids for devotionals or preaching on this theme are provided. For some, it might make most sense for the prayer experience to surround an opportunity for congregational response to the survey. For other congregations, the prayer and Bible study might be most helpful in a class or other study environment. No matter how the resources are used, they will provide the biblical, spiritual and theological foundation for this season of discovery in the life of our Fellowship. We hope and pray they will be useful to you and your congregation however you feel led to use them.

⁶They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; ⁸so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Acts 16:6-10 (NRSV)

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

1. Review CBF's Toward Bold Faithfulness initiative online at www.cbf.net/tbf.
2. Go to www.cbf.net to read more about CBF and its values, purpose and attributes.
3. Familiarize yourself with Acts 16:6-10 and read the commentary included with this study.
4. Provide Bibles or print a copy of Acts 16:6-10 for each person in your group.
5. Create a poster or write on a large whiteboard the words "Toward Bold Faithfulness." Be sure to leave space for writing underneath each word.
6. Gather markers or other utensils for writing, as well as paper.

COMMENTARY

Use this commentary as a brief guide for background on the text to help you prepare and to help your group understand the context of this passage.

Acts 16:6-10 is a remarkably succinct narrative that describes a transformation journey in the mission of the early church—nothing less than a journey toward an unimaginably bold faithfulness. At the end of this text, Paul and his companions have set out on what will become a remarkable expansion of the reach of the early church.

It is easy to rush to the end of the journey, because the writer of Acts uses such a remarkable scarcity of words. But we must not do so. Instead, we must notice that the journey described in Acts 16 immediately follows a season of intense theological controversy in the life of the early church. Acts 10-15 narrate the church's intense struggle with the question of whether Gentiles could become Christians without first becoming Jews. A difficult debate arose in which believers appealed to Scripture, tradition and personal testimony to support vastly different positions. Finally, a gathering in Jerusalem produced enough of a resolution that the church's mission could continue even as early Christians held differing perspectives on these tense questions. Paul's letters, particularly Galatians, offer clear evidence that even after the so-called Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15), debates and discussions continued about this matter among early Christians.

But it was not only during intense theological controversy that Paul's journey arose. It also followed a difficult personal conflict that led to a painful separation among church leaders. Barnabas and Paul had traveled together on the first missionary journey. Not only that, but Barnabas had been Paul's mentor and sponsor both in Jerusalem and Antioch. But Acts tells us that Paul and Barnabas had a disagreement about young John Mark. Paul took offense at actions of John Mark and didn't want him to continue in the missionary work. Barnabas disagreed, and the ensuing conflict was so intense that Barnabas and Paul went different ways. So, as Acts 16 begins, Paul is recruiting new leadership, building new collaborations and trying to find his way without his most constant mentor in faith.

We should also be reminded that Paul's entire ministry played out in a time when there were no cultural or political supports for the work of the early church. The Roman Empire and Jewish authorities were committed to other religious beliefs, and either did not understand Christianity at all or viewed it as an obscure or laughable religious minority. Paul could not count on any cultural prominence or political support for his work. If anything, when he left his Pharisaic past, he left all of that behind.

So, we must notice that Paul began this journey narrated in Acts 16 in a cultural context that was not receptive, remained in a season of theological controversy and was reeling from a difficult personality conflict that led to a significant leadership transition.

Paul's journey began in an uncertain and difficult moment. The narrative of Acts 16:6-10 moves so quickly that we miss the length of this journey. Depending on the route, the journey from Phrygia to Troas was more than 1,000 miles on foot. In the course of these verses, Paul made attempts first to return to places he had been before (Galatia), but doors that were once open were now closed. Notice the painful language: "They were forbidden by the Holy Spirit." "The Spirit of Jesus did not allow them." They had to "pass by" so many places. We can only imagine that the further he went without a clear sense of direction, the more fragile and uncertain the journey with new companions must have felt. This was a journey filled with slammed doors and experiences of vulnerability. Eventually it brought Paul to Troas, a port city and, in many ways, it must have seemed like the end of the road.

FORMING TOGETHER (15 minutes)

Once your group gathers, begin your time by using the following prayer experience.

Prayer Experience

Use this prayer experience as a means to invite the Holy Spirit to join you as you consider how God would call you, your congregation and your community to move toward bold faithfulness. Before this experience, be sure each person has his or her own Bible or create and print handouts of the passage before your gathering.

Say: Following the birth of Jesus, we enter the new year as Christians with aspirations of hope and joy. Often, we set goals during the new year—goals to exercise more, eat healthier, spend more time with friends and family, participate in community service projects, and the list goes on. When we set new year's resolutions, the goals come from within.

We are a group of believers seeking a bold call for our community together. Calling is discovered in community. We discover calling by listening generously, speaking honestly and seeking faithfully. We discover calling when we invite God to join us in our space.

As we listen to our Scripture passage using *Lectio Divina* (or divine reading), I invite you to consider what God may be calling you to do in 2020. Perhaps God is calling you as an individual to amplify a gift for your church or community. Perhaps God is calling your Sunday school class to mentor young adults or participate in a service project outside of the church. How is God calling you? We will listen to Acts 16:6-10 as it is read three different times. Between each reading, I will provide prayer prompts for you to engage with the Scripture and with God.

1st Reading – Invite the group to sit in a comfortable position, uncrossing their arms and legs. Invite them to close their eyes and let go of any distractions. Invite the group to take three deep breaths (breathing in for a 1-2-3 count, holding for 1-2-3, and exhaling to a 1-2-3 count). After the breathing exercise, ask the group to listen generously.

Say: For the first reading, listen generously to the text. What sticks out for you? Is it a word or a phrase? How does this text speak to you in the moment? Hear these words. (Read text.)

2nd Reading – After a sufficient amount of silence (2-3 minutes), ask the group to open their Bibles to Acts 16:6-10 or give each person a handout of the Scripture.

Say: We will listen to the passage as it is read a second time. This time, I invite you to follow along as we listen. How do you hear the passage this time? Perhaps a different word or phrase catches your attention. As you follow along, underline or write down the word or phrase that speaks to you. Hear these words. (Read text.)

After reading, pause for 15-20 seconds, then ask for a few volunteers to share the word or phrase that speaks to them. Ask them to simply share the word or phrase without offering any explanation.

3rd Reading – After the group has shared their responses, invite them to once again sit in a comfortable position and close their eyes.

Say: We will listen to the text read a third and final time. After listening to the passage, get in groups of two or three. Share the word or phrase that speaks to you. (It can be the same one or a different one.) What is it about the word or phrase that caught your attention? What might that signal to you as you listen for God's call in your life? Here these words. (Read text.)

After a time of sharing in their small groups, interrupt them and ask that they quietly pray for one another in their groups. Once everyone is finished praying, offer a spoken prayer thanking God for speaking to the group through Scripture. Ask God to help each of you to listen to God's call on your life to live with bold faithfulness.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Read the following paragraphs aloud to the group (or ask three volunteers to read one paragraph each). As a group, consider all the ways in which Paul demonstrated bold faithfulness and was formed by his faith.

Having described the context of this journey and recognized the difficulty and vulnerability it involved, we are now prepared to consider the end of it. In the night, at Troas, in a moment of intense vulnerability, Paul has a vision. He sees a man from Macedonia, begging him to come over and help. Doors to Galatia and Asia Minor had closed. But now a new door was swinging open. The door to Macedonia was a summons to Europe. The night vision at Troas was a call to a bold new missionary journey, a work of church-starting on a new continent and an opening to Europe and the West. The vision was so clear and the call so compelling that immediately Paul and his companions tried to cross over. They heard a man pleading. They discerned a new calling. They were convinced. They immediately reorganized their lives to respond.

This call to Macedonia was not a continuation of the status quo. It was a bold new calling. Paul and his companions were uncertain and fragile. But now they were convinced, having heard a clear call in the voice of a pleading they could not ignore. In a most difficult time, coming out of a deeply contested and conflicted season, the early church experienced a calling toward a bold and remarkable future. Theirs was a journey from uncertainty and fragility toward bold faithfulness.

Bold faithfulness is a perfect description of the actions of Paul and his companions as they embarked on a new journey in response to the vision given them by the Holy Spirit. What made their action bold? The response described beginning in Acts 16:10 required Paul and his companions to leave behind familiar territory and begin in new places that would require new ways of starting congregations and strengthening believers. They would interact with people of different cultural and religious backgrounds. This step toward the new and unfamiliar was undeniably bold. It required faithful courage and undeniable risk. That they responded so quickly and decisively was also an act of bold faith.

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ENGAGING TOGETHER (10 minutes)

Share the following story about one CBF church's journey toward bold faithfulness. After reading, take a few moments to consider places where the group has seen faithfulness similar what is shared in the story. Ask the group how they think they engage their faith like First Baptist Church of Athens. CBF Executive Coordinator Paul Baxley was pastor of First Baptist Church of Athens and provided this story.

In the winter and spring of 2013, First Baptist Church of Athens, Georgia, was in a process to discern God's call for our congregation. We were paying attention to the deep needs of our congregation, our community and the world. But we were also paying attention to the gifts, graces and resources we had been given. On an April Sunday following worship, we gathered for lunch in our Fellowship Hall and followed that lunch with a congregational meeting in which we participated in a mapping of all of our congregation's ministry assets. The walls of that room were covered with lists of resources entrusted to our congregation, and we had even begun imagining new and more faithful uses for those assets in response to urgent needs. One of the biggest questions was how we could be more faithful in our use of our commercial kitchen. There was already a daily feeding ministry in Athens, and we didn't feel called to duplicate a ministry already offered in our community. So, there was no clear direction.

Barely 36 hours later, while I was dropping my children off at school, my phone started ringing. It was the leader of the community feeding ministry. The previous night, there had been a devastating fire in the kitchen of the church that had hosted the feeding ministry for more than two decades. Her statement: "We have nowhere to feed our guests today." Her question: "Could we serve lunch at First Baptist today?" That morning, I heard a pleading I still remember.

Four hours later, members of First Baptist came out to welcome guests to our Fellowship Hall for lunch. Milledge Avenue Baptist, a sister CBF congregation, offered their bus to provide transportation from the usual location to our church. Three days later, our deacons, missions committee and property management committee voted to offer the use of our facilities for six months while the ministry figured out its next steps. Two months into that arrangement, we were invited to become the permanent host of the ministry. Lay leaders of our congregation spoke boldly and courageously about their sense that we were called to respond to the call of Jesus in this way. In less than four months, we had become the next "permanent" home for that ministry. Sharing space in that way required us to learn new lessons, build new relationships, forge new friendships, while also dramatically expanding the reach of our ministry. I remember sitting in awe in the congregational conversations as we heard and responded to that calling. In those days we discovered a capacity for agility and experienced a calling to a new and bold kind of faithfulness that challenged us and remade us, even as it extended Christ's love in our community.

Have you seen faithfulness in the life of a believer or a congregation such as this example at First Baptist Church Athens?

VISIONING TOGETHER (10 minutes)

Just as it was with Paul, God invites us into God's vision for each of us and for the world. As you consider Paul's response to God's call, give the group the opportunity to seek God's call on their lives. Perhaps do this in a moment of silent prayer or prayer together in groups of two or three. How are you asking God to join you along the way?

This Acts journey toward bold faithfulness invites us to remember our own experiences and celebrate the times we have experienced such bold faith, even as it invites us to pray that we might be open to even bolder faith in our congregations and in our Fellowship for the sake of Christ and His mission in the world.

We might also notice that Paul's context was not that different from the setting the church faces in North America and Western Europe today. The larger culture is not nearly as hospitable as it once was to Christian faith and practice. The lives of congregations and denominations are increasingly fraught with theological and political conflict. Personality divisions and moral failures have caused significant problems. And yet, individual congregations and communities that serve them are still seeking ways of faithful witness to the message and mission of Jesus Christ.

All around us, more and more congregations and denominations can identify with the frustration and fragility that lingers beneath the surface of Acts 16. Old ways of ministering do not seem to bring the results they once did. Former paths are closed off. Many of us find ourselves in a season of searching.

Perhaps we can also identify with another aspect of Paul's journey. He started out believing he knew what he was supposed to do. He tried to go back to places he had already been, but he was prevented from doing that. Seeing Paul's experience with closed doors may remind us of the danger of believing we know more than we do about how God is calling us. It should cause us to be aware that sometimes God's calling takes us in directions we do not expect, that are "abundantly far more than all we could ever ask or imagine." Paul's journey should caution us not to impose our own instincts on these kinds of processes, but rather to be prayerful, open and available to the direction the Spirit will lead through the pleadings of those in need or the shared discovery of a community.

This text in Acts 16 challenges us in these ways and in others. Not only does it challenge us as individuals and congregations, it also challenges our Fellowship. What if the Holy Spirit has a necessary and bold future for our Fellowship that will move us together toward an even more faithful future? How are we uniquely gifted and graced to encourage congregations, strengthen their leaders, and draw us all into a unique way of extending Jesus' mission all around the world? How can we draw our congregations into deeper relationships with each other, with global missions field personnel around the world, with theological schools and other partners for the flourishing of congregations and toward a more faithful witness in the world?

Just like Paul and his companions, we are carrying out ministry in a culture that is challenging and in a season of theological conflict, often with new leadership and less familiar partners. The journey can feel uncertain, and many of us feel more vulnerable. Many are speculating that congregations and denominational communities are reaching the end of the road, and that better days are behind us and not ahead.

We pay attention to this remarkable text because it offers us a profound hope at this moment, and even the promise of a calling that will transform not only our congregations, but also the world in which we live. The source of our hope is not in our own creativity or ingenuity, but in the very character of God who makes a way where there seems to be no way, who opens doors even as the same God delivered Israel from Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead. Our invitation, throughout this period of discovery, in our congregations and across our Fellowship,

is for us to pray fervently for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and listen intently for the pleadings of the world and the callings that might be conveyed through them.

This text invites us to pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us on journeys toward bold faithfulness, both in our congregations and in the community of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. This text challenges us not to merely pray for a path toward survival or for old doors to open again. Rather, this text invites us to pray more boldly that the Holy Spirit will do a new thing in us and through us.

Paul's experience challenges us not to fall prey to the temptation to keep doing the same old things, but rather to be open to new paths and new ways of serving. At the same time, Paul's example invites us to confess the times we have tried to force a direction in our faith that is less than the one that Jesus desires for us. This text offers the promise that, precisely at the times we feel most vulnerable and despairing, God often works to do new things, open new doors, and summon the church to new seasons of faithfulness. Let us dare to pray that God will do the same for us.

Our invitation, throughout this period of discovery, in our congregations and across the Fellowship, is for us to pray fervently for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and listen intently for the pleadings of the world and the callings that might be conveyed through them.

REFLECTION (10 minutes)

To start a discussion about Acts 16:1-6, consider asking and answering the following questions with your group:

1. How does this Acts journey toward bold faithfulness speak to you? To your congregation? To our Fellowship in this season of discovery?
2. Can you remember a time in your life when you witnessed bold faithfulness in the life of another believer? Can you remember a time when you saw bold faith at work in the ministry of your congregation or another congregation? Can you remember a time when your community responded decisively and boldly to a call from God that required reorganization, new learnings, and posed definite challenges but that also enabled a much greater participation in Jesus' mission of love in your community?
3. Have you ever been in a situation where more doors seemed to close than to be open? Has there ever been a time in your life or in your congregation's life where no matter how hard you searched the right path was not clear? Perhaps you made a decision that you thought was right and quickly realized it was not. How did that feel? What did you do?
4. In the text, during the night, Paul has a vision where he hears pleading from a man in Macedonia asking him to come over and help. Paul's response is immediate. He responds with conviction. What are the pleadings of your community that require a faithful response? What kind of faith is required to respond to pleadings in this way?
5. How might it change your congregation to pray that the Holy Spirit would summon you to a bold faithfulness in your community and around the world? How would that be different from merely seeking a path of survival in a challenging world?
6. Will you pray for our Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as together we seek to find a way for our Fellowship to encourage congregations toward bold faithfulness and more powerful participation in Jesus' mission in our communities and around the world?

Applying Acts 16:6-10

In addition to any discussion, consider writing the phrase "Toward Bold Faithfulness" on a whiteboard or another visible writing surface. Leave space under or near each word to capture responses.

Say: As a group, we will work with each word and come up with synonyms or words that remind us of "Toward," "Bold," and "Faithfulness." Consider how you would define each of the words and explain their meaning to someone else. We will share our our responses together as a group to learn what you have discovered.

Questions you may ask:

- What stands out to you?
- How has your church moved toward bold faithfulness in the past?
- How is your church moving toward bold faithfulness now?
- What gives you hope about your church? About CBF?

RESOURCES

Quotes

“Hope is always most necessary precisely when everything, spiritually, seems hopeless.”

- Thomas Merton

“Faith is still a surprise to me, as I lived without it for so long. Now I believe that it was merely dormant in the years I was not conscious of its presence. And I have become better at trusting that it is there, even when I can’t feel it, or when God seems absent from the world.”

- Kathleen Norris

“Now faith, in the sense in which I am here using the word, is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods. For moods will change, whatever view your reason takes.”

- C.S. Lewis

“Faith is not being sure where you’re going, but going anyway.”

- Frederick Buechner

“I love the recklessness of faith. First you leap, and then you grow wings.”

- William Sloane Coffin

“The Christian faith makes it possible for us nobly to accept that which cannot be changed, and to meet disappointments and sorrow with an inner poise, and to absorb the most intense pain without abandoning our sense of hope....”

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

Closing Prayer

God, you have called us to be bold in our faith. This call is no small matter as it asks us to risk much for the cause of Christ. Give us courage to be bold and give us strength to be faithful, even when our doubts overwhelmingly tell us to be anything but bold. Thank you for your call on us, for your love for us, and for your life that continues to be with us. In Jesus name, Amen.