

The Book of Acts, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 22: Into Macedonia: Lydia and the Philippian Jailer

Acts 15:36–16:40

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Acts 15:36-16:40 carries the gospel into Europe and records two contrasting conversions, Lydia and the Philippian jailer. What is doctrinally at stake includes God's providential guidance of His servants through open and closed doors, God's work in opening hearts alongside genuine human response, the consistent conversion pattern of hearing, believing, and being baptized, worship and joy in suffering, and the way godly people handle disagreement.

The heaviest doctrinal weight falls on the jailer's conversion. Present the consistent pattern the study has emphasized: the word was preached, the jailer believed, and he was baptized that same hour of the night (vv. 31-33). The man who was told to believe was baptized immediately, which refutes salvation by faith only. Note also that the households who were baptized had heard the word and believed (vv. 32, 34), so these were believers responding, not a basis for baptizing those unable to believe.

Yet aim at the heart. This passage calls students to trust God's guidance even through closed doors, to keep their hearts open and attentive to the word, to handle disagreements with grace, to worship God even in suffering, and to rejoice in the gospel that saves all kinds of people. Help them become receptive, joyful, obedient followers of the Lord.

Question 1

Student Question:

The Holy Spirit twice closed the door to where Paul intended to go, then called him to Macedonia through a vision (vv. 6-10). What does this teach about God's providential guidance of His servants, and how should we understand closed doors in our own lives?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul had reasonable plans to preach in Asia and then Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit forbade both. Only after these closed doors did the Macedonian vision come, redirecting him to Europe. God was actively guiding His servant, not by removing his initiative but by steering it.

This teaches that God providentially guides His people, often through a combination of our faithful efforts and His redirecting hand. Paul kept moving, kept seeking to preach, and God closed and opened doors to lead him to the right place. The man of action and the sovereign God worked together.

It also reframes how we understand closed doors. The closed doors in Asia and Bithynia were not God saying no to the mission; they were God saying not here, this way instead. A closed door is not necessarily a rejection or a failure; it may be God's loving redirection toward something better that we cannot yet see.

Help students apply this with discernment. We should make wise, faithful plans and pursue good purposes, while holding our plans loosely and trusting God to redirect us. When doors close, rather than despairing, we can trust that the God who guided Paul is guiding us, and watch for the door He is opening instead. His guidance is often clearest in hindsight, but it is always at work.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's providential guidance of His servants (vv. 6-10)
- Guidance through our faithful efforts and God's redirecting hand
- Closed doors as redirection, not necessarily rejection
- Holding our plans loosely and trusting God to lead
- God's guidance often clearest in hindsight

Discussion Prompts

- How did God guide Paul through both closed and open doors?
- How should we understand closed doors in our own lives?
- How can we hold our plans loosely while trusting God's guidance?

Question 2

Student Question:

When doors closed before Paul, he kept seeking God's direction and followed where God led (vv. 6-10). How do you respond when your plans are blocked or redirected? How can you better discern and follow God's guidance rather than only your own agenda?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's response to blocked plans is instructive. He did not force his way through the closed doors, nor did he give up the mission. He kept moving, kept seeking, and remained responsive to God's leading, ready to change direction when God redirected him.

Invite honest reflection. How do I respond when my plans are blocked? Do I push harder against the closed door, grow frustrated and give up, or stop to seek God's guidance and follow where He leads? Often we are so attached to our own agenda that we miss the redirection God is offering.

Discerning God's guidance involves holding our plans before Him with open hands, paying attention to the doors He opens and closes, seeking wisdom in His word and through godly

counsel, and being genuinely willing to go where He sends rather than only where we prefer. It requires a heart more committed to God's will than to our own plans.

Encourage students toward this responsiveness. When plans are blocked, the faithful response is not stubbornness or despair but prayerful attentiveness: Lord, where are you leading instead? The God who redirected Paul to Macedonia, where Lydia and the jailer waited, can be trusted to lead us, often to fruit we never would have planned.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Remaining responsive to God's leading when plans are blocked
- Holding plans before God with open hands
- Discerning guidance through the word, prayer, and counsel
- A heart committed to God's will above our own agenda

Discussion Prompts

- How do you respond when your plans are blocked or redirected?
- Do you tend to push harder, give up, or seek God's leading?
- How can you better discern and follow God's guidance?

Question 3

Student Question:

Luke says the Lord opened Lydia's heart to pay attention to what Paul said (v. 14). What does this teach about God's work in conversion and the human response, and how does God open hearts through His word?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Lydia's conversion is described with a beautiful phrase: the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. God was at work in her heart, enabling her to receive the gospel. Conversion is not a purely human achievement; God is active in drawing and opening hearts.

Yet notice that God opened her heart to pay attention to the word Paul was preaching. God did not save her apart from the gospel; He opened her heart to receive the gospel. The word and the work of God go together. Faith comes by hearing the word of Christ (Romans 10:17), and God uses the proclaimed word to open hearts and bring people to faith.

This holds together God's work and human response without contradiction. God opened Lydia's heart, and Lydia paid attention, believed, and was baptized. We need not pit divine grace against genuine human response; both are present. God graciously works, and people genuinely respond. Lydia was not coerced; her heart was opened, and she gladly received and obeyed the gospel.

Help students see how God opens hearts: through His word. This is why the preaching and teaching of the word matters so much, and why we pray for open hearts when we share the gospel. We cannot open hearts ourselves; only God can. But He works through the word we bring, opening hearts to pay attention and respond, as He did for Lydia.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God actively at work in opening hearts (v. 14)
- God opening hearts to receive the preached word (Romans 10:17)
- Divine grace and genuine human response held together
- Conversion neither purely human nor coercive
- The proclaimed word as the means God uses to open hearts

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the Lord opened Lydia's heart?
- How do God's work and the human response fit together here?
- How does God open hearts through His word?

Question 4

Student Question:

The Lord opened Lydia's heart so that she paid attention to the gospel (v. 14). How open and attentive is your own heart to God's word right now? What tends to close or distract your heart, and how could you cultivate greater receptivity?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Lydia's open, attentive heart is a model worth examining ourselves against. She paid attention to the word, received it, and acted on it. The condition of our hearts toward God's word largely determines how it shapes us.

Invite honest reflection. How open and attentive is my heart to God's word? Do I come to Scripture and preaching with eager attention, ready to receive and obey, or with a distracted, half-closed, or hardened heart? The same word falls on every heart, but it bears fruit only in the receptive soil (Luke 8:11-15).

Many things can close or distract the heart: busyness, familiarity, unconfessed sin, the cares and pleasures of the world, a critical or proud spirit, simple inattention. We can hear the word constantly and yet not really pay attention to it, letting it wash over us without taking root.

Encourage students to cultivate receptivity. While only God opens the heart, we can prepare the soil, by coming to the word with humility and expectancy, by removing distractions and known sin, by asking God to open our hearts as He opened Lydia's, and by resolving to act on what we hear. A heart that prays open my heart, Lord, and pay attention is a heart God delights to fill.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The condition of the heart determining how the word bears fruit (Luke 8:11-15)
- Distractions and sin closing the heart to the word
- Cultivating receptivity through humility and expectancy
- Praying for God to open our hearts as He opened Lydia's

Discussion Prompts

- How open and attentive is your heart to God's word right now?
- What tends to close or distract your heart?
- How could you cultivate greater receptivity this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul and Barnabas had such a sharp disagreement over John Mark that they parted ways, yet God used even this to advance the gospel (vv. 36-41). What does this teach about disagreements among godly people, and how can God bring good even out of our conflicts?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

It is honest and humbling that Scripture records this conflict between two great servants of God. Paul and Barnabas, who had labored and suffered together, disagreed so sharply over whether to take John Mark that they parted company. Godly people, even apostles, can have genuine, painful disagreements.

This teaches us not to be disillusioned when conflicts arise among faithful believers. Sincere Christians can disagree, sometimes sharply, over real questions. This does not mean one is godly and the other is not; it means they are human, seeing differently, and both fallible. We should neither be shocked by such conflicts nor conclude that they prove someone is unspiritual.

Notice how God overruled even this conflict for good. Instead of one missionary team, there were now two, multiplying the work. Barnabas invested in Mark, who later proved profitable for ministry, so that even Paul came to say, get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me (2 Timothy 4:11). The breach was real, but it was not the end, and God brought good out of it.

Help students hold two truths. We should work hard to handle disagreements well and pursue reconciliation, for not all conflict is handled rightly. Yet we can also trust that God is able to bring good even out of our conflicts and failures, weaving them into His purposes. Disagreement among godly people is not the end of the story; God is still at work.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genuine disagreements arising even among godly people (vv. 36-41)
- Conflict not necessarily proving someone unspiritual
- God overruling conflict for good (two teams; Mark restored)
- Mark later proving useful for ministry (2 Timothy 4:11)
- Trusting God to bring good even out of our failures

Discussion Prompts

- What does this conflict teach about disagreements among godly people?
- How did God bring good out of the breach?
- How does this encourage you when conflicts arise among believers?

Question 6

Student Question:

Though Paul and Barnabas separated over Mark, Mark was later restored and became useful to Paul again (vv. 37-39; 2 Timothy 4:11). When you have conflict with a fellow believer, do you tend toward grace and reconciliation or toward lasting division? Is there a relationship God is calling you to mend?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The story of Mark has a redemptive ending. The young man who deserted the mission and became the subject of a sharp dispute was given a second chance by Barnabas, grew, and was eventually restored even to Paul's esteem. Conflict did not have the final word; reconciliation and restoration did.

Invite honest reflection. When I have conflict with a fellow believer, which way do I tend? Toward grace, second chances, and reconciliation, or toward lasting grudges, cutoffs, and division? Do I write people off after a failure or a falling-out, or do I leave room for growth and restoration?

The gospel is a message of reconciliation, and it calls us to be reconcilers. As far as it depends on us, we are to live peaceably with all (Romans 12:18), to forgive as we have been forgiven (Ephesians 4:32), and to pursue restoration. Holding grudges and nursing divisions contradicts the grace we have received.

Encourage one concrete step toward mending a relationship. Is there a believer I have written off, a breach I have left unhealed, a grudge I am holding? Like Barnabas with Mark, we can choose grace and second chances. And like Paul, who came to value the very man he once refused, we may find that reconciliation bears fruit we never expected. Whom is God calling you to forgive or restore?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reconciliation and restoration over lasting division
- Leaving room for growth and second chances
- The call to be reconcilers (Romans 12:18; Ephesians 4:32)
- Grudges and cutoffs contradicting received grace

Discussion Prompts

- Do you tend toward grace and reconciliation or toward lasting division?
- Is there a believer you have written off after a conflict?
- What relationship might God be calling you to mend?

Question 7

Student Question:

After being beaten and imprisoned, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God at midnight (v. 25). What does this reveal about worship and trust in the midst of suffering, and where does such joy come from?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The scene is unforgettable. Paul and Silas have been stripped, beaten with rods, thrown into the inner prison, and fastened in stocks. Their backs are bleeding, their situation is dire, and it is the middle of the night. And what are they doing? Praying and singing hymns to God, while the other prisoners listen.

This reveals a worship and trust that rise above circumstances. Their joy did not depend on comfort or deliverance; it flowed from their relationship with God and their confidence in Him. They could worship in a dungeon because their treasure was not in their circumstances but in the Lord.

Where does such joy come from? Not from pretending the suffering does not hurt, but from a faith that sees beyond it, a settled trust that God is good, that He is with them, and that their lives are in His hands. Paul later wrote from another prison that he had learned to be content in any situation and could rejoice in the Lord always (Philippians 4:4, 11-13). This joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) and a gift God gives to those who trust Him.

Help students see that this kind of worship in suffering is possible, and powerful. Their songs were heard by the other prisoners and set the stage for the jailer's conversion. When believers worship God in the midst of hardship, it testifies to a hope and a joy the world cannot understand or take away.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Worship and trust rising above circumstances (v. 25)
- Joy flowing from relationship with God, not comfort

- Contentment and rejoicing learned in any situation (Philippians 4:4, 11-13)
- Joy as a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22)
- Worship in suffering as a powerful testimony

Discussion Prompts

- What does the midnight worship reveal about Paul and Silas?
- Where does joy in suffering come from?
- How can worship in hardship be a testimony to others?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul and Silas worshiped God in their darkest hour, and others were watching and listening (vv. 25-26). Do you tend to worship and trust God in your hardest moments, or to turn away from Him? How might your response to suffering become a testimony to those around you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The example of Paul and Silas confronts us with how we respond to our own hard moments. Suffering reveals what is in our hearts. Some, in hardship, draw near to God in trust and worship; others turn away in bitterness, doubt, or despair.

Invite honest reflection. When I am in pain, loss, or difficulty, do I worship and trust God, or do I turn from Him? Do I pour out my heart to Him in honest faith, or do I grow resentful and distant? Our response to suffering is one of the truest tests of our faith.

Worshiping God in suffering does not mean denying the pain or putting on a false cheerfulness. It means bringing our pain to God honestly while still trusting and praising Him, like the psalmists who lamented and worshiped in the same breath. It is faith holding on to God in the dark.

Encourage students to consider the watching world. Paul and Silas did not know the other prisoners were listening, but they were, and the jailer was soon saved. How we face suffering preaches a sermon to those around us. A believer who trusts and worships God in hardship displays a hope the world cannot explain, and that testimony can open hearts, as it did in Philippi.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Suffering revealing what is in the heart
- Worship in suffering as honest faith, not denial of pain
- Bringing pain to God while still trusting and praising Him
- Our response to suffering as a testimony to others

Discussion Prompts

- Do you tend to worship and trust God in your hardest moments?
- What does your response to suffering reveal about your faith?
- How might your response to hardship become a testimony to others?

Question 9

Student Question:

When the jailer cried out, what must I do to be saved? Paul answered, believe in the Lord Jesus, and then they spoke the word to him, and he was baptized that same hour of the night (vv. 30-34). What is the consistent conversion pattern shown here, and how does the jailer's response correct the idea that we are saved by faith only?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it must be taught carefully, because verse 31, believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, is sometimes quoted to teach salvation by faith only. But the full account corrects that misreading decisively when we read the whole story rather than a single phrase.

Trace the sequence. The jailer asks what he must do to be saved. Paul first says, believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household, because faith is the necessary foundation, the starting point of the response. But Paul does not stop there. The very next verse says they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house (v. 32). The jailer needed to be taught the word, which surely included what believing in the Lord Jesus involves and requires, just as Peter's preaching had included the call to be baptized.

Now watch what happens that very night. The same hour of the night, the jailer washed their wounds, and he was baptized at once, he and all his family (v. 33). The man who was told to believe was baptized immediately, in the middle of the night, before he even waited for morning. Why would he be baptized at once if believing only, with nothing further, had already saved him? Because the word Paul spoke to him taught him that saving faith responds in baptism, exactly as it had for the three thousand at Pentecost, for the Ethiopian, for Saul, and for Cornelius's household. The urgency of the midnight baptism shows that baptism was understood as essential to his salvation, not an optional later step.

This corrects the faith only error plainly. Believe in the Lord Jesus is not a formula that excludes everything else; it is shorthand for the whole obedient response of faith, just as we might tell someone today, believe in Jesus, meaning come to Him in the way the gospel directs. The jailer's belief led him, that very hour, to be baptized. As Jesus said, whoever believes and is baptized will be saved (Mark 16:16). Faith and baptism are not opposed; the believing jailer was baptized at once.

Note also the households. Both Lydia's household and the jailer's were baptized, but the text shows these were people who heard and believed the word: the jailer rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God (v. 34). Those baptized were believers responding to the gospel, not those incapable of faith. This account gives no support to baptizing those who cannot believe; it shows believers, having heard the word, gladly obeying the gospel.

Pastorally, end where Luke ends, on joy. The jailer who an hour before was ready to kill himself now rejoices with his whole household, washed, forgiven, and baptized into Christ. The same gospel, received the same way, hearing the word, believing, and being baptized, still brings the same joy. Help students see the beautiful consistency of conversion in Acts and the gladness that follows obedience to the gospel.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The conversion pattern: the word preached, faith, and immediate baptism (vv. 31-33)
- Believe in the Lord Jesus as shorthand for the whole obedient response of faith
- The midnight baptism showing baptism understood as essential, not optional
- Faith and baptism joined, not opposed (Mark 16:16)
- The refutation of salvation by faith only
- The households as believers who heard and believed the word (v. 34)
- Joy following obedience to the gospel

Discussion Prompts

- Why was the jailer baptized that very hour if believing only had already saved him?
- How does the whole account correct a faith only reading of verse 31?
- What do the households show, and not show, about who is baptized?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over this whole passage, God's guidance, Lydia's open heart, the midnight worship, and the jailer's conversion, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to respond, in trusting His guidance, opening your heart, worshiping through hardship, or obeying the gospel, and what is one step you will take this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone draws the lesson to a personal response. Acts 16 calls us to trust God's guidance through open and closed doors, to keep our hearts open to His word, to handle disagreements with grace, to worship Him even in suffering, and to obey the gospel that saves all kinds of people.

Invite each person to name one concrete step. Perhaps it is to trust God with a closed door, to cultivate a more open and attentive heart, to mend a broken relationship, to worship through a current hardship, or, for anyone who has not, to obey the gospel as Lydia and the jailer did.

Keep the focus on the joy that runs through this chapter. From Lydia's household to the jailer's family, the gospel brought salvation and rejoicing. Transformation looks like an open, trusting, obedient, joyful heart.

Close by reminding students that the same God who guided Paul to Macedonia, opened Lydia's heart, sustained His servants in prison, and saved a jailer at midnight is at work in them, guiding, opening, sustaining, and saving, and bringing the joy of the gospel to all who respond.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal response to God's guidance, the open heart, and the gospel
- Worship and trust through hardship
- Obedience to the gospel bringing joy
- The gospel saving all kinds of people

Discussion Prompts

- What most challenged or moved you in this passage?
- What specific step toward trusting, opening your heart, worshiping, or obeying will you take?
- How can this group encourage and pray for you?