

The Book of Acts

Lesson 22: Into Macedonia: Lydia and the Philippian Jailer -- Acts 15:36–16:40

Even great men of God can disagree sharply. As Paul plans a second journey, he and Barnabas clash over whether to take John Mark, who had deserted them on the first trip. The disagreement is so sharp that they part ways. Barnabas takes Mark and sails to Cyprus; Paul takes Silas and heads overland through Syria and Cilicia. It is a painful scene, yet God overrules it, and now two missionary teams carry the gospel instead of one. Along the way, in Lystra, Paul gains a young companion named Timothy who will become like a son to him.

Paul intends to preach in Asia, but the Holy Spirit forbids it. He turns toward Bithynia, and again the Spirit will not allow it. The doors keep closing, until one night Paul has a vision: a man of Macedonia stands begging, come over to Macedonia and help us. Immediately they conclude that God has called them to take the gospel into Europe, and they set sail. The closed doors were not God saying no to the mission, but God steering them to the place He had chosen.

In Philippi, the gospel takes root in the most unlikely pair of hearts. First there is Lydia, a successful businesswoman, a seller of purple cloth and a worshiper of God. As she listens by the river, the Lord opens her heart to pay attention to Paul's message, and she and her household are baptized. Then there is a jailer, a rough Roman official who has just locked Paul and Silas in the inner prison with their feet in stocks, their backs bleeding from a beating. And at midnight, instead of groaning, Paul and Silas are praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners are listening.

Suddenly an earthquake shakes the prison, the doors fly open, and the chains fall off. The jailer, certain his prisoners have escaped, draws his sword to kill himself, but Paul cries out, do not harm yourself, for we are all here. Trembling, the jailer falls down and asks the question at the heart of this whole study: what must I do to be saved? Paul answers, believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household. They speak the word of the Lord to him, and that same hour of the night he washes their wounds and is baptized, he and all his family, and the whole household rejoices, having believed in God. Two conversions, a wealthy woman and a hardened jailer, both brought to Christ, both baptized, both filled with joy.

Group Discussion: Paul and Silas responded to a beating and imprisonment by praying and singing hymns to God at midnight (v. 25). Where do you think that kind of joy in suffering comes from, and what would it take for you to worship God in the middle of your hardest moments?

Personal Reflection: The Lord opened Lydia's heart to pay 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?

Read Acts 15:36–16:40

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Romans 10:9-17, confessing and believing in the Lord Jesus, with faith coming by hearing the word; Mark 16:16, whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; Philippians 4:4-13, rejoicing in the Lord always and contentment in every circumstance; Luke 8:11-15, the word bearing fruit in the receptive heart; Romans 8:28, God working all things, even conflicts, for good