

Discouragement turned around

Littlebourne - 23rd June 2023 - Acts 16:6-15



Last time in Acts, we read about the Timothy joining Paul and Silas, as the pair reached Derbe and Lystra. Everything seems to be going very well, as verses 4 and 5 tell us:

As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. 5 So the churches were strengthened and in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

But then things take a bit of a turn in today's passage.

v6-8

6 And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. 7 And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. 8 So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.

Paul, Silas and Timothy travel onward, through Phrygia and Galatia (see map), but they are forbidden to speak in Asia, so they go round to Mysia. Then, attempting to go to Bithynia, they are again prevented by the Holy Spirit.

Two times, we see them prevented from going to certain places by the Holy Spirit. Paul wasn't shy about going to places that were new to him, or that wouldn't be completely welcoming, so this must have been a clear sign.

Whilst we don't know exactly how they judged that the Holy Spirit was forbidding them from going to Asia and Bithynia, but today we have a few good rules to help us discern whether something we hear, or dream or feel, is from God or not.

1. Does it give glory to Jesus Christ?
2. Is it consistent with scripture?
3. Do other people who are filled with the Holy Spirit have a confirming witness?
4. Is there confirmation in objectively verifiable events or facts?

Maybe Paul and co took this sort of approach, or maybe the Holy Spirit was obvious about it in ways we don't understand and Luke doesn't record, but whatever the case, they took this very seriously.

You can imagine how discouraging this might be - the map indicates it's at least 300 miles, probably more if they went around the long way, likely walking the whole way.

But the example that they set is to not be discouraged, but to keep on going - maybe they have an idea that there will be better yet to come, and it's not time to head home yet.

v9-10

9 And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Now, after the Holy Spirit forbidding them, things turn around. Now they receive the clear instruction that they should travel to Macedonia.

Encouraging, yes, to find that they haven't travelled such a distance for nothing. But also, it's another 150 miles or so to go.

This time, we get more information about how God directed them - it was a vision. It says it came at night, maybe it was a dream, though it doesn't say that specifically. Whatever form it took, Paul concludes that it's definitely from God. He knows somehow.

Also, this is the first time in the passage that we see the use of the word 'we' to describe what is going on. The author, Luke, was with Paul and Silas and Timothy at this point, hence he can give a first hand account. We'll see this use of 'we' again later in Acts, in Paul's third journey and then later as Paul travels to Rome.

v11-12

11 So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, 12 and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days.

They have clear instruction on where to go, and they go with haste. A day's sailing to Samothrace, then another day's sailing to the other side of the Aegean Sea. They travel a huge distance in little time, thanks to the geography.

Once they get there, they head straight for the heart of the region. Philippi was the capital of the region, a city founded by Philip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great. When Paul visits it's been under Roman control for 200 years (since 167BC).

Underscoring the importance they gave to having been called there specifically, they stick around.

This marks the furthest the gospel has reached so far in Acts - we've not yet seen the gospel go beyond Asia minor, and now, having crossed the Aegean, it reaches Europe proper. Paul might have been intending to spend his time in Asia, but he has been called beyond to somewhere that Christianity hasn't been before. And it seems there has been little Jewish influence either, as we find in the next verses.

v13-14

13 And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. 14 One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.

The usual thing we read about when those sent out reach a new place is that they go directly to the local synagogue. They know that there they will find people with whom they have things in common and an opening into reaching people in the city. In this case, that's not what we read - instead, on the Sabbath rather than visiting a synagogue, they head to the riverside.

Philippi therefore probably didn't have a synagogue. At the riverside place of prayer, they meet women. Jewish law - not the Torah, but the Mishnah, the oral law tradition dating from around the third century BC - stated that you can't fully worship God without ten men. Until you have that many Jewish men present, certain prayers were not permitted and you couldn't form a proper synagogue. It seems that they might not have had even ten Jewish men in all of Philippi.

When they move on to Thessalonica, after leaving Philippi, Luke says there was a synagogue of the Jews there, like it's some unusual thing for this area.

We then meet Lydia, who is described as a worshipper of God (which doesn't actually tell us if she was Jew or gentile). Luke tells us that she was from Thyatira, and sold purple goods.

Thyatira is in Asia (remember this is where Paul and Silas were earlier forbidden by the Spirit to go). Thyatira was a place famous for wool and dying, and was a main route of the indigo trade, the trade in expensive blue-purple dyes that were traded from India. (The Greek word for the dye was indikon, reflecting that it was from India.) Purple dye was very expensive, owing to the great distance it travelled to reach Roman territory.

Lydia was a worshipper of God, but similar to others we've seen, like Cornelius in Acts 10 for example, she hadn't heard the gospel yet. In God's providence, Lydia and Paul were both at the right place at the right time, and so Paul's words found their target.

It says that "the Lord opened her heart" - God was at work in this situation, as well as Paul. Paul was sent all this way, and had responsibility to preach and teach there, but God doesn't just leave him to it. God is at work, and actually doing the work that made the real difference.

Paul's preaching, like all preaching, was a scattershot approach. Nothing wrong with that. But God's arrows pierce to the heart, precise and accurate, just as is required to turn those that hear to belief. We should try to be clear and understandable and persuasive. But ultimately, the power in preaching is not in the preacher, but in the hands of God. The Holy Spirit's efforts are the decisive aspect, not ourselves.

15 And after she was baptised, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

Baptism is next, as is the pattern we've seen in Acts so far. It seems like it was pretty quickly done too - no waiting about.

There's also the issue of what it means that Lydia and her household were baptised. I think we shouldn't read more into the text than is there - it doesn't say if her whole household then professed faith as she did, or not. In the other examples of households being converted/baptised that we see in Acts - Cornelius and his family in Acts 10, Crispus in Acts 18, The Philippian Jailer later in this chapter, we see the implication that all the household believed, so maybe that's the case here as well.

We also don't know if Lydia was the head of her household - a widow perhaps. What we do know today is that when the head of a household converts, when the father converts, the likelihood is that the rest of the family follows.

One survey found that if a child is the first in a family to convert, there's a 3.5% probability that the rest of the family follow. If the mother is the first to convert, there's a 17% probability that the rest of the family follow. But when the father is first to convert, then there is a 93% chance everyone else in the household will. Parents, fathers especially, have huge influence in their families, and this I think is part of the reason we see the conversion not just of individuals throughout Acts, but whole households and families.

Then she insists they come and stay at her house. What had been a rather discouraging journey, has turned to a fruitful one.

Conclusion

You can imagine that Paul, Silas and Timothy were getting discouraged as they found themselves forbidden from going to Asia. They attempt to go to Bithynia, but again, they are stopped. Hundreds of miles of walking, and they may have felt there was little point - they've travelled these vast distances with a purpose in mind, and have been thwarted. Not even thwarted by those they met, but the Holy Spirit has told them they can't do what they wanted to.

What they may not have realised as they trudged on through Mysia all the way to Troas, was that God had in mind something else - the plan was to go beyond anywhere the gospel had ever been before, to expand the boundaries and spread word all the way into Greece.

It seems that God works not only in opening the right doors for us, but in shutting doors too. He prevents us from doing the wrong things, even when that's maybe frustrating to us, as well as giving us opportunities when the right time comes.

We in the chapel here might have the same experience. When we started, we were very encouraged - we grew to more than just the Hollanders pretty quickly. But the majority of our time here we've been steady in numbers. We have plenty of room for more, we pray for more people to join us, but we haven't yet seen it. We can believe that whilst we don't know specifically what God has in store, the best is yet to come.

Even when they reach Philippi, Paul wouldn't have known that the church he and his friends start there would be a good, faithful, joyful church. His letter to the Philippians, which he writes whilst he's in prison in Rome, is unusual in that he doesn't address some serious issue that the church there had. Contrast his letters to other churches - Philippians is a letter that speaks very highly of the church there.

Paul also wouldn't have known that the very region he was prevented from entering earlier, Asia, would be full of churches too (as we see in Revelation), and that he would have opportunity to visit there on his way back home, and on his third missionary journey.

So there is always great cause for hope and optimism - God's plan is one that sometimes features times of discouragement or seeming lack of progress. But if they hadn't trudged through Mysia, there would be no Philippi.