

## Closed Doors; Open Hearts

Acts 16:16-40

Today, as we continue our study in the book of Acts, we are going to see the principle that **God leads his messengers to those whom He has prepared to hear the message of the gospel.**

Luke's primary focus in this chapter is Paul's ministry to two individuals who meet Jesus not because Paul had a plan to reach them, but because God sovereignly led him and his team to them. God used closed door to get Paul in front of open hearts.

As we come to Acts 16:6-40, Paul and his missionary team have been visiting churches that they established on their first missionary journey. Once they do that, Paul's plan and desire is to move into other areas of Asia in which the gospel has not yet gone. This is the beginning of what we call Paul's second missionary journey. Let's look at the first story.

### Story One: A Closed Door in Asia; an Open Heart in Europe – Lydia (16:6-15)

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

Twice, Paul and his team seek to go into areas of what is modern day Turkey, but we are told that they are *forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word* there (v. 6) and that the *Spirit of Jesus did not allow them* to take the Gospel there (v. 7). They experienced closed doors. All we know is that the Spirit was not allowing them to go where they planned to go. The door was closed in Asia at this time. And so they head west to *Troas*, which was a major port city on the Aegean Sea. While there, verse 9 . . .

*<sup>9</sup> 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." <sup>10</sup> 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.*

The closed doors in Asia now make sense to Paul. God is redirecting them to take the gospel to new lands. God is leading Paul to go to preach the Gospel in Europe. With this new clarity, Paul *immediately* seeks to go. Luke explains how they find a ship and two days later they make it to Philippi, which as a town of about 10,000 people. After a few days in the city, Luke tells us in verse 13:

*<sup>13</sup> 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.*

Paul's typical pattern when he went to a new town was to go first to the Jewish synagogue. But to establish a synagogue required at least 10 men. It seems that the numbers of Jews in this area was so low that there was no synagogue. Instead, the Jews gathered outside the city where they could gather for prayer and so that's where Paul goes. And what Paul finds is a gathering of women. He sits down and speaks with the women.

*<sup>14</sup> 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.*

Lydia is from Thyatira, a city renowned for its purple dye used to make luxurious clothing for the extremely wealthy. She was apparently a successful businesswoman. She was a *seller of purple goods*. Just to be clear, this was not K-State gear. She sold clothing that catered to the wealthy, which certainly brought her wealth. Luke also tells us that she was a *worshiper of God* and that the *Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul*. She hears the gospel and believes and becomes the first convert in all of Europe.

*<sup>15</sup> And after she was baptized, 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.*

Lydia believes and is baptized as are the people in her household. The genuineness of her conversion is expressed in her hospitality. She opens her house to Paul and his team. Ultimately, as we will see at the end of our passage, her home becomes the first house church in Europe. And as we know from Paul's letter to the Philippian church, this church will become very dear to Paul. They will become generous in helping fund Paul's missionary endeavors and we have every reason to believe that Lydia was a significant contributor.

God leads his messengers to those whom He has prepared to hear the message of the gospel. He used closed door in Asia to get Paul to an open heart in Europe. That's the first story. The second story involves a closed door in prison that leads to the open heart of a Roman jailer.

### **Story Two: A Closed Door in Prison; an Open Heart – The Roman Jailer (16:16-40)**

Luke continues his narrative by describing how on another day Paul and his team were going to the place of prayer when they encounter a slave girl who had a spirit of divination. This girl's fortune-telling ability brought much profit to her owners. Luke tells us that day-after-day, she would follow Paul and proclaim that they were servants of the Most High God who were proclaiming the way of salvation (v. 17). Luke tells us that she did this for many days and that eventually, Paul becomes *greatly annoyed*, and he commands the spirit to leave her, and it does.

As a result of this, her owners lose their ability to profit off her and they are mad. They seize Paul and Silas and drag them into the marketplace. Their real concern is financial, but when they talk to the authorities, they argue that Paul and Silas as Jews who were advocating

customs that were not lawful for Romans. And secondly, they claim that they are *disturbing* their city. At this point a mob mentality takes over and the crowd gets into the act. In response, without appropriate judicial process, the magistrates order for them to be beaten with rods. We are told that they *inflicted many blows*. And then the magistrates order them to be thrown into jail – a dark, dirty Roman prison. Talk about a closed door! They cannot continue to preach and teach about Jesus in the streets of Philippi.

What do they do?

*<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them,*

Is this not amazing? Like the disciples earlier in the book of Acts, they rejoice to suffer for the name of Christ. And as they worship God, the *prisoners were listening to them*. I'm sure they had never heard anything like this. While they are singing and the prisoners listening a dramatic thing happens.

*<sup>26</sup> and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. <sup>27</sup> When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup> But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."*

We are to understand that this quake is of God. Doors were opened. Bonds were unfastened. When the jailer becomes aware of this, he is convinced that all the prisoners have escaped, and he plans to kill himself knowing that this would be his penalty. But Paul calls out stops him.

*<sup>29</sup> And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"*

That an open door, right?

*<sup>31</sup> And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." <sup>32</sup> And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.*

*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.* This is the message they preached to the jailer and to all who were in his house. And Luke makes it clear that the jailer did believe through the things that happen next.

*<sup>33</sup> And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. <sup>34</sup> Then he brought them up into his*

*house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.*

God leads his messengers to those whom He has prepared to hear the message of the gospel. Paul and Silas experience the closed door of a prison. But in that horrible place, God leads them to the open heart of a Roman jailer.

Now, before we talk about a couple of principles that are critical for any messenger of God to be led and to find closed doors leading to open hearts, I wanted to share the final details of this chapter.

The next morning the officials decide to release Paul and Silas. They want them to simply leave town. We don't know why they had a change of heart. Maybe they suspected that the earthquake was some kind of judgment from the gods. Maybe they knew they could get in big trouble because they had broken the law. The bottom line is that they want to quietly get Paul and Silas out of town. But Paul refuses to go quietly. Instead, he insists on his rights as a Roman citizen. He makes the officials come to prison, apologize, and then to personally let them out.

I think it is likely that Paul insisted on his civil rights here because doing so would give the believers that he is leaving behind some protection and legitimacy. This public apology surely influenced the standing of the church in the eyes of the people.

Now, in the very last verse of the chapter, we read this:

*<sup>40</sup> So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.*

The fact that Luke mentions that they visit Lydia and that they *had seen the brothers* suggests what I mentioned earlier – Lydia's home becomes a gathering place of this new church.

None of what happens in this chapter is by Paul's design. Rather, The Spirit of God closed doors in Asian to get Paul to Europe face-to-face with an open heart and Lydia becomes the first believer in Europe. Once in Philippi, Paul's plan seemed to be to continue to teach the Jews there and I'm sure he intended to preach the gospel to any who would listen. But because of the encounter with the slave girl, Paul finds the door to any kind of ministry shut as he is thrown in jail. But there he finds the open heart of a Roman jailer. Certainly, God was leading in this as well. God leads his messengers to those whom He has prepared to hear the message of the gospel.

But here's the thing, moving from closed doors to open hearts required some things from Paul. There were some things that needed to be true of him in order for him to be led. And these things need to be true of us as well if we want to allow God to lead us to open hearts that he is preparing around us.

First, **be willing to be led**. One of the things that is so clear in this passage, and in fact in the whole book of Acts, is that God leads his messengers. Twice in our passage we see how the Spirit of God closed doors to the Gospel in Asia. We see God giving Paul a vision directing him to where he wants him to go.

Paul didn't know that a woman named Lydia, with an open heart existed, but God did. Paul didn't know that an influential woman with the means to help support his missionary work and who had a home in which a new church could be established in Philippi existed, but God did. But Paul was willing to be led. He was sensitive to the Spirit of God. And as a result, he sets aside his plans, pivots, and travels to Europe where he meets Lydia, shares the gospel with her, and a church was born in Europe.

Have you ever considered that as you move through your days that God may be doing similar things? I believe that God is still opening hearts to the gospel and that if we are willing to be led, He will lead us to people with open hearts. The question is, are we willing to be led? Will we be sensitive to God's Spirit? Will we allow our plans to be interrupted and changed to follow God's leading?

There is nothing more amazing than the opportunity to sit with a person whose heart is truly open to learning about Jesus. I believe that God wants to lead us to such people IF we are willing to be led.

Here's a thought on how you can grow and develop this heart of being willing to be led. Start every day expressing something like this to God: *Father, my life is in your hands. I'm fully available to be used by you today to help point someone to Jesus and so guide me by your Spirit.* That is one way to express your willingness to be led.

Here's the second thing that needs to be true of us if we are going to move from closed doors to open hearts. We need to **be willing to suffer well**. Moving from the closed door of a prison cell to the open heart of the jailer required Paul's willingness to suffer well.

God uses hard circumstances to get Paul and Silas where he needs them to be – in jail. And while they are in jail, they had a choice to make. They could complain. They could be angry at God. But they weren't. Instead, they chose to suffer well. And as a result, a Roman jailer met Jesus.

Have you considered the possibility that God wants to use your suffering for good? That God wants to demonstrate the power of the Gospel through your faith-filled approach to the things you suffer? People pay attention to how we suffer. Sometimes this is one of the most powerful testimonies we can give for the gospel.

Many of you know that last year and into the early part of this year, Erick DeWolf was up at Mayo getting treatment for throat cancer. Erick and Heidi went up mid-November and stayed until the first week of January. The whole journey with cancer is a time of suffering but being

separated from their family during both Thanksgiving and Christmas added to it. They could have complained, but instead they chose to suffer well.

Erick and Heidi gave me permission to share this updated that Heidi wrote on December 6 last year. Speaking of a lobby at Mayo that many people pass through, Heidi wrote:

Thousands of people pass through every day. Patients, caregivers, kids, medical workers, all have someplace to be or someone to wait for. I've been playing the piano during radiation treatments at first for myself, but now for those passing through. I knew coming to Mayo that I would continue my work: creating an environment for people to connect with others, with God, or with their own souls. The melody of work may take different turns, but the song is the same. Christmas carols weave through the heaviness. These are not just happy sounds, but prayers for peace and longing for spiritual and physical relief.

Last week, late at night, I met Ghanem, a gentle, kingly young man from United Arab of Emirates caregiving for his father. He was waiting while his loved one received treatment, too. Dressed in robes and ghutra, Ghanem asked to hear more of what I was playing.

Heidi told me that at she was only playing the song, but this gentleman asked if she also sang. Heidi said she gulped because she doesn't like singing in public, but she knew that the words of *What Child is This* spoke the Gospel and so she played and sang that song. She goes on in her post to say this:

*What Child is This* sang out a silent prayer for him to not only seek peace in this difficult time, but to find it. Erick joined in the conversation at the end of his treatment, listening in his calm and kind way.

And then Heidi made this point:

Each of us is positioned daily to give of what we have to meet a need, or receive what we need from others that have something to give. I create an environment for connection. Erick listens with a compassion that imitates Jesus. We both receive more than we give. This story has been told and will be told for as many years as we will be alive together. We receive and we give. Even here. During cancer treatments. Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgements, His paths beyond tracing out . . .

That is suffering well – literally singing in their suffering. And God used it. A man from the United Arab Emirates heard the good news of a child being born who brings salvation. We don't know the end of the story for that man, or for any of the other people who observed how Erick and Heidi suffered, but I have no doubt that God did and is still using it in the lives of those who observed them.

The reality is that we will suffer in this world. And we can either be embittered by it, or we can continue to trust God in our suffering and suffer well. And if we suffer well, God will so often use it to lead us to open hearts and to demonstrate the power of the gospel.

If we are willing to be led, if we are willing to suffer well, I believe that God will lead us from closed to open doors and we will find ourselves with people who are open to hearing the good news of Jesus.

As I've considered this passage this week, I've been reminded that my good, loving, wise, Heavenly Father is at work in ways that I cannot see preparing hearts to hear and respond to the good news of the gospel. And I've been reminded that God wants to get his messengers (which we all are) close to these people he is preparing to love them, care for them, and help them understand what Jesus has done for them. The only question is am I willing? Am I willing to be led and am I willing to suffer well that God might lead me from closed to open doors. This is the kind of adventure that God is inviting all of us to be on with him as he is seeking and saving those who are lost.