

Paul's second missionary journey got off to a shaky start. He and Barnabas got into a fight over whether or not take John Mark with them to visit the churches they started on their first missionary journey. Paul did not trust John Mark because he left them at a crucial point in their ministry last time.

Paul and Barnabas parted ways, and headed in opposite directions. Barnabas and John Mark retraced the steps of the first missionary journey, while Paul took Silas to accompany him via another route. Paul revisited some of the churches, and encouraged them, but he was unable to have an effective ministry in reaching new converts. He struggled spiritually, was confused, and had to question himself. As I indicated last time, I think this internal struggle helped Paul to settle the issues that were in his heart that had been a hindrance to his ministry.

Once Paul did business with God, the Holy Spirit once again became powerful in him. In a vision, God called Paul to Macedonia to share the gospel with people on the European Continent. From our passage this evening, through the middle of chapter 18, we will read how God blessed the efforts that Paul and his companions put into sharing the gospel on the second missionary journey. As we will see in tonight's passage, their efforts begin to bear fruit when they reached Philippi, and led a woman named Lydia to faith in Jesus Christ. Let's see what lessons we may learn by reading together, Acts 16:11-15.

Once Paul responded to the vision God gave him, everything moved quickly forward. I have found this to often be true in my personal experience as well. If we were to plot our spiritual journey on a graph, more than likely it would not be in a straight incline from bottom to top, but we would see a series of advances and plateaus, or perhaps advances and declines. Think about the stock market. Hopefully our spiritual journey is not that erratic, but everybody experiences ups and downs. The upsides bring us great joy, where we see God at work in us, and through us. The downsides are useful for personal reflection, and sharing our concerns with God.

If we continue the analogy of the stock market, Paul's ministry had been very bearish, and undervalued, but in response to the vision, we might say his stock advanced 500 or 1000 points in a single day. The bible says that they made a direct voyage to Samothrace. Samothrace is an island in the Aegean Sea. With the wind to their back they made really good time to this stopping point on their journey. The next day the fair winds persisted and carried them to Neapolis, a port city on the coast just ten miles from Philippi.

When God gives us a vision, and we throw ourselves whole-heartedly into doing what God has shown us, He goes before us. God opens new doors. He prepares people's hearts. He equips us, and accompanies us in the power of His Holy Spirit. Sometimes things happen very quickly, at other times we have to be patient, as God goes before us.

When God spoke to me about drinking, it took me a couple of weeks to have complete victory over that problem in my life. When God called me into the ministry, in November, everything moved forward very quickly. I was in seminary the following January, and quite unexpectedly, on my second day, the seminary decided to accept my associate degree in electronics from 20 years earlier, cutting off two years on earning my bachelors degree. When God called me back to Hickory Hammock, it was a full year before He had arranged everything to make it possible for me to come. My point is that when God calls, and we respond in faith and obedience, He goes before us and makes things happen, but he does so in His time.

When the missionaries arrived in Neapolis, they traveled the Egnatian Way to Philippi, and later on followed it to Thessalonica. The Egnatian Way was a Roman Road that began on the

western most side of modern day Greece, and on the Eastern side, tied the continents of Asia and Europe together in what is modern day Turkey. As we digest this piece of information, I want us to reflect upon God's perfect timing. Jesus came the first time, after the known world had a common language, Greek, so that all people could hear and understand the gospel. The rapid spread of the gospel came after the Romans had built their version of interstate highways to facilitate easy, and rapid, travel. Naturally, some of the more important and larger cities in the Roman Empire rested on these Roads to facilitate commerce, and the rapid deployment of Roman troops.

The bible says that Philippi was a leading city in the district of Macedonia, and a Roman colony. This was a strategic location for the Roman Military because of its central location, where troops could be sent out in either direction, to stop any uprisings. Because it was on a main road, and an easy ten miles from the port in Neaplois, it also became a center of commerce, with a substantial population. This access to major cities, via these well-built roads, contributed to Paul's decision to focus the bulk of his evangelistic efforts on major cities.

What I find surprising about Philippi is that there was apparently only a small Jewish presence in this substantial city. In other places, Paul always went to the Synagogues first to try to convince the Jews that Jesus was Messiah. According to Jewish law, there had to be at least ten Jewish men to start a synagogue. Apparently there were less than ten adult Jewish men residing in Philippi who were willing to form a Synagogue. We get a hint as to why, in the next passage.

As far as we can determine from scripture, our missionary team consisted of Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke. They stayed in Philippi for some time, but when it came time to worship, there was no synagogue, so they went to a place of prayer that they heard about from the locals.

On the banks of a river, just outside the city gates, they found a group of women who had come together to pray. No men were present, only women. As the missionaries shared the gospel of Jesus Christ, they won their first convert on the European continent. It was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, another center of commerce. She was a seller of purple goods, and she worshiped God.

Purple cloth was expensive in those days and reserved for royalty, and the very wealthy. The primary ingredient for purple dye had to be extracted from certain shellfish that lived only in the waters of the eastern most portions of the Mediterranean Sea. Lydia was a woman of means. She ran a good business, which was unusual in that culture. She was not a Jew, but she worshipped the One True God.

In this account, I see the sovereign hand of God at work. God sent Paul to Macedonia, to Philippi, and to share the gospel with a woman who loved, and worshiped, the Lord with all of her heart. God opened Lydia's heart to receive the gospel message and she surrendered her life in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ.

As we share the gospel, and we go on whatever mission God may send us, we have to remember that God is sovereign over all. In a very real sense we do not win anyone to Christ, but when we are obedient, and faithful to share the gospel, God uses us in the salvation process. He goes before us. He makes the way. God set up this whole encounter. He reached out to Lydia, because she had a heart for God. Once Lydia was saved, God used her to advance the gospel in Philippi.

At this point we need to reflect upon how God uses women in fulfilling his plan. When some read through Paul's instructions to the churches, it is easy for them to come away with the idea that women are somehow less important in God's plan, but that simply is not true. There are

many other passages in the New Testament where women play a key role in the spread of the gospel, in establishing churches, and keeping them going. The gospels tell us that here was a group of women who followed Jesus, and supported His ministry.

There were few Jewish men in Philippi, and apparently none who had the heart of Lydia to be saved. The biblical ideal is that men will be the spiritual leaders in their families, and in the church. But where there are no men qualified, or willing to take on that spiritual role, God will often work in the lives of women to fulfill His purposes of leadership, in accordance with His will. As an example, when a woman loses her husband, the role of spiritual leader is thrust upon her. She becomes solely responsible for the spiritual development of her children.

We are blessed here at Hickory Hammock Baptist Church, because for many years, the men of the church have been willing to embrace their responsibilities before God, but not all churches are that way. I have been in churches, in years past, where if the women did not fill in the gap, the church would have fallen apart.

As soon as Lydia gave her life to Jesus, she was ready to get baptized. Since they were praying at the water's edge, she immediately got baptized, as did her whole household. This tells me that Lydia was the head of her household. Perhaps her husband had passed away and left her with the family business. She kept it going on her own, and was successful. Her household would have consisted of her children, if she had any, relatives living with her, and her servants or slaves. The fact that she had her household with her at the time of prayer, and that they followed her example in faith, shows the strength of her character and emphasizes her leadership qualities.

The bible does not tell us if the other women present gave their life to Jesus that day, but it is quite possible. What we can take away from this passage is that the church at Philippi was founded by a group of women, without, at first, the aid, or interference of any men, other than Paul and his companions. With this background it is interesting to note the kind of church Philippi became.

We know that Paul made a brief stop in Philippi on his third missionary journey, but we learn of the character of the church, and its people, from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul writes the church while incarcerated in Rome. Of all his writings in the New Testament, this Epistle is the most loving. We find no stern warnings. He does not write them to correct any doctrinal error. His words are full of thanksgiving and praise, with encouragement that will help the Philippians to grow in their relationship with the Lord. They were the most supportive, and giving, of all the churches, to help Paul in his ministry.

It seems likely to me that the church in Philippi took on the character of Lydia, its founding member. Her generous and supportive heart is seen in the fact that she opened her home, and insisted that the missionary team stay with her; during the time they were in Philippi. This again is an indication that she was a wealthy, successful businesswoman. Not only did she support her whole household, she had additional room available for Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke. She provided for them while they were in town. She probably led the way in providing for them in their missionary efforts.

Paul and Silas wound up in jail, which is no big surprise. When they got out of jail, they return to Lydia's house, where the bible says that they encouraged the brothers, suggesting to me that the gospel spread quickly, and likely, Lydia was instrumental in leading some of the men in the city to the Lord.

To the women in our church, as you submit to the spiritual leadership of your husbands, and the men who are leaders in the church, never for a minute think that you are somehow less important to God, or this church, or that you are loved any less. God has a plan and a purpose for us

all. The best any of us can do is surrender completely to God's revealed will as we move through life, and just trust Him.

God's will begins for every man, and every woman, that we come to Him in confession and repentance of our sins. We receive His grace and forgiveness through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and His sacrifice on the cross. He seals us with His Holy Spirit, and gives us eternal life. As we live out our faith, He reveals Himself and His will, so that we can play a meaningful role in his purposes. If there should be anyone here who wants to know about how you can come to know Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, we would be happy to explain to you, in greater detail, the salvation, and personal relationship with the Lord, we now enjoy.