

We Can Work It Out

Acts 16:11-15, 40 April 30, 2023

Have you heard about the legendary garage where *Apple Computers* got its start?¹ The truth is, it was more hangout than anything else. Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak said, “[w]e did no designs there, no breadboarding, no prototyping, no planning of products. We did no manufacturing there.” But the legend of the garage lives on because, from that spot, one of the most influential companies of human history was born and we love stories of humble beginnings.

In 1995, Craig Newmark started “an email list to friends about happenings in the San Francisco Bay Area.” More than 25 years later, *Craigslist* still records billions of views every month.² In 1901, Charles Walgreen opened a single drugstore that measured just 50 feet by 20 feet.³

Those are all great business stories, but we’re here to occupy our minds with the eternal. The truth is, God loves to take small seeds - small beginnings - and accomplish everlasting purposes through them. Not using conventional wisdom or market research - not according to a targeted growth plan or a strategic business model, but by the Holy Spirit, Who infuses the organic relationships of Christians with His power and leading, and presents them with unique opportunities.

The founding of the church at Philippi in Acts 16 is a perfect example of how God empowers His people, uses them where they are, and advances the Gospel even when His people aren’t sure what to do, don’t know what’s coming, and must venture into uncharted territory.

Ten years after the events of our text, Paul would write to the Philippian Christians and say:

Philippians 2:12 - ¹²**Therefore, my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed, so now, not only in my presence but even more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.**

This morning we see the *start* of that work and, hopefully, we’ll be stirred up by the reminder that we are part of the work too and that we, together, can work out the extraordinary call of the Gospel in our own family of faith.

Acts 16:11-12a - ¹¹**From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, the next day to Neapolis,** ¹²**and from there to Philippi, a Roman colony and a leading city of the district of Macedonia.**

The year is around 50 AD.⁴ Paul is traveling with Silas, Timothy, and Luke. This is his second major missionary journey, but it got off to a strange start. Paul wanted to travel into Asia, but we’re told

¹ <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/apple-garage>

² <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/24/808965078/at-25-years-understanding-the-longevity-of-craigslist>

³ <https://www.lovemoney.com/galleries/83820/the-humble-beginnings-of-the-worlds-biggest-businesses?page=6>

⁴ *CSB Study Bible Notes*

that the Holy Spirit had *forbidden* them from speaking the word there. While in Troas, Paul received a vision of a Macedonian man who pleaded with Paul to “*Cross over to Macedonia and help us!*” Macedonia means the island of Greece. This would be the first spread of the Gospel into Europe.

Setting sail, Paul and his three friends must’ve been brimming with anticipation. They had dramatic leading from God. The wind was at their backs. The 156 mile trip that would later take them five days only took two in these verses.⁵ They land in Neapolis and then walk 10 miles to Philippi.

Philippi was an interesting and privileged city. Its inhabitants had special rights given by Rome, including Roman citizenship and exemption from certain taxes.⁶ Many veterans lived there and it had a storied military history.⁷ Philippi was home to active gold mines and a school of medicine.⁸

Paul experienced a lot of different things in the course of his Christian life, but I’m guessing this team was ready for a *huge* Gospel event. Maybe another Day of Pentecost situation, where *thousands* were saved after one sermon. Instead...

Acts 16:12b - We stayed in that city for several days.

Nothing happened. No great revival. No invitation to the forum to speak. When Paul was in Derbe back in chapter 14, we’re told that he preached the Gospel and made *many* disciples. In Iconium a “a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.” But in Philippi, nothing was happening. At least not yet. They discovered there was no Jewish synagogue in town, meaning there weren’t even ten Jewish men in the city. For several days, there was no open door for them to walk through.

We’re not told if Paul and his friends were deflated. I think I would have been - or at least very confused. God sent them to this place, in a sense, at the *expense* of other places. Paul planned to go to Asia - *No!* Go to Philippi. He tried to go to Bithynia - *No!* Go to Philippi. Weren’t there people who needed the Gospel in Neapolis and Samothrace? Absolutely. In fact, Samothrace was home to a “widely patronized” mystery cult.⁹ And the Lord cared about those people. Paul told Timothy in First Timothy 2, “[*God*] *wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*” So, Lord, why are we losing days in Philippi where nothing is happening and no one is listening?

I remember the first time our church sent a team to Colombia. We were flying out of LAX and that day there was a shooting which grounded most flights. Ours made it out, but in all the chaos, we missed our connection, which meant we would lose a day in Houston. That wasn’t part of the plan. Once there, we had nothing to do. I remember we felt a little confused, a little discouraged, a little unsure of what we should do. I can only imagine what Paul and his friends were thinking.

⁵ R. Kent Hughes *Acts: The Church Afire*

⁶ *Faithlife Study Bible Notes*

⁷ F.F. Bruce *The Book Of Acts*

⁸ Ben Witherington *The Acts Of The Apostles*

⁹ Bruce

Acts 16:13 - ¹³ On the Sabbath day we went outside the city gate by the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and spoke to the women gathered there.

So, not only were there not ten Jewish men, there were *no* Jewish men! According to tradition, if there was no synagogue, the faithful would meet in the open air by a river or the sea.¹⁰ They would meet to pray and recite scripture and hear from any traveling teachers that may have come.

Acts 16:14 - ¹⁴ A God-fearing woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, was listening. The Lord opened her heart to respond to what Paul was saying.

Let's deal with a doctrinal point here. This phrase "the Lord opened her heart to respond to what Paul was saying" is a demonstration of what is called *prevenient grace*. There are some Christian traditions which teach that God determines who will believe and who will not, and that there's nothing you can or can't do about it because, they say, His grace is *irresistible*. This, of course, goes against the clear demonstrations of free will throughout the Bible, but also stands in contention with Scripture like when Stephen said, "You stiff-necked people...you are always *resisting* the Holy Spirit." Or when Jesus wept over Jerusalem saying, "I wanted to gather you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but *you were not willing!*"

Rather than *irresistible* grace, Lydia's story shows us *prevenient* grace. A good definition of *prevenient* grace is, "An operation of the Holy Spirit that frees the sinner's will from the bondage to sin and convicts, calls, illumines, and enables the sinner to respond to the Gospel call with repentance and faith."¹¹

Man does not initiate salvation. God is the Initiator. The Bible is clear that we are dead in trespasses and sins and that there is no one who seeks after God, not even one. What the Bible shows us is that God loves every person who has ever been conceived. It is His desire to save each and every one of them, but He will not force His love upon us. By lifting Jesus up on the cross, He draws all people to Himself and, by the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the Gospel, God frees our wills to be *able* to respond positively or negatively to His call. As A.W. Tozer wrote in *The Pursuit Of God*, we can only seek God because He sought us first. But the *choice* God gives us is genuine and we are free to respond in acceptance or rejection to His call.

Lydia's heart was touched by the grace of God and the preaching of the Gospel and she exercised her free will to respond in belief.

But back into the scene. Here's Lydia, the first convert in Europe. There are several ironies here. Namely, that the Macedonian man is actually an *Asian Woman*! Her city - Thyatira - was back the way Paul had been. It was in-between Lystra and Derbe, where he picked up Timothy, and Troas, where he received his vision.

¹⁰ Richard Longnecker *Acts*

¹¹ Roger Olsen *Prevenient Grace: Why It Matters*

This is a perfect example of why we must not use human reasoning when it comes to ministry methods or goals. We couldn't have worked out this formula. This is an algorithm that doesn't compute. If God tells us, "I'd like to save a woman from Thyatira," we buy a ticket to Thyatira. Paul was *trying* to get into Asia, the Lord said, "Actually, I need you to go the *opposite* way." And we're so glad he did, because this moment - this Divine appointment - led not only to the great stories of Acts 16, but then to the eternal Epistle to the Philippians, not to mention the fact that the Gospel would continue to ripple through the West for the rest of history. Paul is also glad God brought him to Philippi. This church would become, perhaps, the most-loved and most helpful congregation to the Apostle.¹² He speaks with *great* affection to them in his letter and highlights the special place they had in his heart and ministry.

We're told Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth. This means she would've had wealth and status. There is evidence that dealing in this color may have been an imperial monopoly and that those involved were members of 'Caesar's household.'¹³

Acts 16:15 - ¹⁵ After she and her household were baptized, she urged us, "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

I wonder what Paul spoke on that day by the river. We know that one of the focuses of his teaching to Gentiles was that God had broken down the barriers between Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free. His letters also often use clothing as an analogy for the Christian life. In Ephesians he talks about putting on armor. In Colossians he said to dress yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, and gentleness. In Galatians, which Paul had probably written a little before this text,¹⁴ he wrote, "For those of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ."

Whatever it was that he taught, Lydia had three immediate desires after receiving the gift of salvation: She wanted to share the Good News with her family, she wanted to be baptized, and she wanted to apply the grace she had received from God to her life in generosity and service. James would call this faith that works. The works of baptism, evangelism, and service didn't *buy* her salvation, they were natural *byproducts* of the salvation she had received by faith.

It seems Paul and company needed a little convincing to stay at her house. But they not only stayed, the church started meeting there, too. But the term Luke used is one that suggests she had to talk them into it. She *immediately* wanted to be a partner with them in the work of the Gospel. Paul would acknowledge as much not just about Lydia, but all those believers at Philippians. He opens his letter to them saying how he thanks God for them and their "partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."¹⁵ They took up Christianity as individuals and as a group who partnered together in the powerful work of God in their midst.

¹² Longnecker

¹³ Witherington

¹⁴ *Bible Knowledge Commentary*

¹⁵ Philippians 1:3-5

As a group they immediately started exercising their faith in the simple ways they could. Lydia says, "Why don't we all start meeting at my house instead of walking a mile and a half from the city to the river?"¹⁶ Instead of standing on a muddy bank in the heat, we can sit on chairs inside." That's a simple action that would make a big difference for the whole spiritual family.

Soon, their little church would have many more converts and it just made sense to have a place they could gather together *in* the city. A rallying point. A place where they could worship and pray and learn and spend time together and be built up with one another.

This wouldn't just mean more comfort - it was also a brave act. You see, in Roman colonies, "*foreign cults, especially small ones that were not well established (like Christianity) were often not allowed within the city walls.*"¹⁷ If you're familiar with this portion of Scripture, you know that the unbelievers in the city were *not* happy about the presence of Christianity and made it known very plainly.

But this group of Christians was fearless! They were excited to be together and be a part of what God was doing. They lived from that day on as *partners* in the Gospel. And they would figure out what that partnership meant for them day-by-day as they were led by the Spirit. They had no way of knowing what was going to happen next, but they knew that the Lord was with them in strength and power and presence.

They didn't know that, very soon, Paul and Silas would be taken, beaten, and thrown in jail. Undoubtedly the church got together at Lydia's to pray and to talk about what should be done. Should they stage a jail break? Should they try to buy them out? Should they do nothing? I'm sure they went to Luke and Timothy and said, "What do we do?!? What is the Christian response?"

They didn't know that, in a few years, a lot of suffering would come their way. In his letter, Paul would explain that it had been granted to them not only to *believe* in Christ, but also to *suffer* for Him. Wow. But Paul would encourage them: Keep standing firm together, suffer together.

On that first day in Lydia's house, they didn't know that their little church family would soon consist of merchants and slaves, veterans and government officials, young and old, rich and poor, all coming together in this glorious, spiritual partnership. All able to enjoy the fellowship of faith, even when the world would divide and separate them.

They didn't know they only had a short time with Paul and his companions. Soon, they'd be on their own, working out their salvation with fear and trembling. But, ten years later, Paul would write and say, "Yes! Keep working out your salvation - do it together - and know 'that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion.'"

The day after Paul and Silas were thrown in the dungeon, they were released and, before leaving town, stopped where the church was meeting.

¹⁶ Longnecker

¹⁷ Witherington

Acts 16:40 - ⁴⁰ After leaving the jail, they came to Lydia's house, where they saw and encouraged the brothers and sisters, and departed.

In that short meeting, part of Paul's encouragement would have been to tell them that what they had was sufficient not only for growth, but for great spiritual effectiveness. They had the Holy Spirit. They would have to navigate the way forward together as a church family, being led by the Lord.

As Paul left, we know they supplied for his needs, not just once, but in a tender, ongoing way.

Philippians 4:15-16 - ¹⁵ And you Philippians know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone. ¹⁶ For even in Thessalonica you sent gifts for my need several times.

Paul and his friends would need food, some money, fresh bandages for their wounds, probably new clothing. They were first-timers in Greece, so they could probably use some local directions.

But they weren't just partners in giving him stuff. They were partners in grace, in care, in the defense of the Gospel and the confirmation of the Gospel. He would remind them that God's plan is to advance the Gospel through the lives of His people. And Acts shows that this advancement happens in a wide variety of ways, through every sort of Christian.

This young church would have to work it out, but with the Lord's help, they'd be able to do wonderful, Godly things. Toward that end, Paul encouraged them to stand firm together, to not be frightened by their opponents, to suffer together, for each of them to look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. And Paul told them to *rejoice* together. He repeated that encouragement to them. Rejoice! And he told them that, as they work out their salvation, to not put confidence in the flesh. Don't use human methods to try to discover God's leading. Human methods wouldn't have put Paul in Philippi. Thank goodness humans weren't in charge!

The Christian life is meant to be one of power and many opportunities and we are meant to work out our salvation together. Because God has scattered us into this time and place so that we each can be lights shining in our corner of the dark. We individually and collectively are able to pursue God and bring others to Him in unique ways that God has set before us. We will face unique challenges along with our unique opportunities, but we're able to face them together as an ever-growing family of faith, partnering together with each other and with the Lord as He leads us on.

We don't know what might happen tomorrow. It may be shocking, difficult, or totally uncharted. We don't know every spiritual plan or opportunity that God has in mind for us as a local church. His ideas are often very different than what we expect. But that's why He has given us the Holy Spirit and His Word and a spiritual family so that we can walk together in wisdom and strength and effectiveness. We are few but we are strong when God surrounds us and empowers us. Let's advance, rejoicing together, and seeking God together for what He would have us to do.