

Over the first 3 studios we've looked at some of the ways in which the Bible teaches the doctrine of God's providence. We will return to that approach in future studies, but for this study we will look at an exciting example of God's providence in action - particularly in an incident which focuses on the spread of the gospel.

It can be easy to think that God is not committed to the spread of the gospel. Sometimes it feels like the progress is slow. But in Acts we have the advantage of seeing behind the scenes. As well as observing the commitment and actions of the Lord's servants (like Paul), we can also see how God is at work enabling different people to hear the gospel and drawing people to faith.

This incident begins unusually (vs 6-110). Paul and Silas have just been in Derbe and Lystra. Timothy joins them and they continue to preach. They want to continue in Asia, but they can't (vs 7). We want to know more than we are told, we don't know exactly how "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to". This may not necessarily mean a vision or even a feeling, it could have been more straightforward than that. What we are getting in verse 7 is the view from behind the scenes. In the providence of God, whatever opposition or obstacle there was, it came from the Lord.

Their plans had to change. Interestingly, if you trace out the geography of their movements on a map they take a long and circular route. This may point to the fact that they just don't know what to do! But the Lord gives Paul a vision and calls them into Macedonia (that is, across the sea into Europe).

It is important at this point to note that this is unusual, even in the book of Acts. As you see, even in these verses, the normal way Paul acted was to pray, plan, and act - taking every opportunity to do what they were called to do. This is how we should live too. Paul wasn't hanging around waiting around for a vision. The point of these verses aren't so that we should expect a vision. The big message is that the Lord is committed to the spread of his gospel - and will do it takes to get his gospel in the right place, using all manner of things to do so.

They enter Macedonia in vs 11-12 and go to Philippi. Philippi was an important trading city. So it is not surprising that one of the women who listen to Paul and the others was Lydia, a businesswoman who sold cloth made from expensive purple dye.

The really significant thing about Lydia is where she was from. We are told in verse 14 she was from "Thyatira" - which is back in provincial Asia. This is within the place that Paul and the others had been prevented from entering back in verse 6 and 7. We may have read those verses and asked "what about all the people in Asia who now don't get to hear the gospel?" But the Lord has brought Paul and the others into Europe to reach not just Europeans, but also Asians (as Lydia would take the gospel back with her when she moved about with her business).

God has placed Lydia in the right place to hear the gospel, and he has placed Paul in the right place to preach the gospel. And then, he is also at work opening Lydia's heart to listen and believe the gospel (vs 15). As we read on in Acts 16 Paul and the others meet other people who God

works in - a slave girl and a jailor. Lydia is very different, she's a "worshipper of God", which probably means a gentile convert to Judaism. We might be tempted to think she was highly likely to believe the gospel. But even she couldn't believe without God being at work in her heart.

Notice the two things that God needed to do to save Lydia. He needed to bring Paul and the others to her for them to "speak the word of God" to her (vs 13). And he needed to "open her heart". And then she and her household were baptised.

Hopefully we'll be thrilled by seeing the Lord's work in this incident. Remember in Acts we've got the behind the scenes narration - we are having God's work behind the scenes pointed out to us. God is at work providentially right now as we serve him and as we seek to take the gospel to others. And even times when it feels like there are dead ends are not dead ends to him!

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

What have Paul, Silas and Timothy just been doing (vs 6)?

What do they want to do? How do you think they may have felt about the fact their plans were hindered?

Why are we told they can't they do it? (vs 7)

What new direction do they receive? Do you think this was the normal way Paul was led by the Lord? What does it tell us about the Lord's commitment to the work Paul was doing? (vs 8-10)

Where do they end up preaching the gospel? Why is Philippi significant? (Vs 11- 12)?

Who is among those they are speaking to? Where is she from? Why is that important [Leader - You may need to supply this information]? (vs 13-14)

What does this tell us about God's wisdom and ways?

What was needed to happen for Lydia to believe the gospel? See vs 13 and vs 14? Is this work seen or unseen?

Think about how you came to trust Christ. Can you see hints of the Lord working behind the scenes to bring you to faith?

How does this encourage us as we seek to tell others about Jesus?