

Acts Series Part 44

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[0 : 0 0] It's all about people. God's purposes in this world, His world, revolve around saving and transforming men and women, real people, and all kinds of people, people like you and me, people in real families and in all kinds of families and communities. This is what God's work is about. It's about His love for people and how that love finds expression in saving us and transforming us. Acts chapter 16 tells us the stories of three such real people, real people created by God, known by God, loved by God, and wonderfully transformed by God.

And this week that has begun, that begins today, will be a week, I am sure, in which not three, but many, many stories, like the ones we find in this chapter of Acts, will be enacted in real life with real people today. God has not changed. He is still in the business of saving and transforming people. Well, with these thoughts in mind, let's rejoin our merry band of missionaries on Paul's second missionary journey. We've been going through this book of Acts on and off, morning, evening, and let's rejoin, as I say, Paul and his companions on this particular journey. They are heading to Macedonia. They had been called to Macedonia, as we read in the chapter. As they make their way to

Macedonia, I imagine that the question that was very much on their minds, in the mind of Paul and Silas and Timothy, possibly Luke as well, the question that was on their mind, I am sure, was, why Macedonia? Why have we been called to this particular province? Particularly given the unusual circumstances of how they were called, this vision of a man from Macedonia crying out, come over and help us. And so, as they cross the Aegean Sea, as they ponder on what awaits them, I am sure there was in this group of men a great sense of expectancy. What awaits us? What plans does God have? There must be something special awaiting us that would explain why, in this very unusual way, God has made it so clear to us that this is the place that we must go to. Our plans have been different plans, but God clearly has something awaiting us. And so, there would have been this expectancy, I am sure, on the part of these men. Well, they sail from Troas, we're told. We're given a brief summary of their journey. They spend the night on an island, midway point between what today would be modern-day Turkey and modern-day

Greece. And then in the morning, the dawn of the following day, they continue their journey to Neapolis, the port that would then lead them on to Philippi. And it was from Neapolis to Philippi, a ten-mile, roughly, a walk along the Via Ignatia, one of these amazing networks of Roman Roman roads that were constructed during that empire. Indeed, those who have had the opportunity to visit these locations are able to see the very same paving stones upon which Paul and his companions would have walked from Neapolis to Philippi, still in place this very day. I imagine Aberdeen City Council and others could learn a thing or two about road building from our Roman friends.

I wonder, as they walked along that road, they arrive in Neapolis, they're walking along this road, heading to Philippi. It's every step brings them closer. I wonder what the conversation was about.

[4 : 49] Wonder with me for a moment. What would they have been talking about as they made their way to Philippi? Were they wondering, perhaps, if they would meet this mysterious man who had appeared to Paul in his vision? I wonder if his companions were saying to Paul, well, what did he look like? So that if we arrive, maybe we'll see him and you won't see him. Describe him to us. Might that have been the content of their conversation? Well, we don't know. But I am sure that whatever it was, it was marked by this sense of excitement and expectation as to what was awaiting them in Philippi. One thing they knew, and it was this, that God had plans for Philippi. And so they enter into the city in that confidence.

Well, they arrive in Philippi, and they begin to explore the city with a view, no doubt, to discovering, discerning how and where they might announce the good news about Jesus. It was for this reason that they had gone. Verse 10 makes it very clear. They had concluded that God had called them to preach the gospel in Macedonia, in Philippi. And so this is their concern. Where are we going to do this? When will we do this? In what circumstances will we be able to fulfill our mission? They discover that there was no synagogue in the city. That was Paul's usual first port of call, but that was not an option, for there was no synagogue. But they also discover that a group of women would meet outside the city gate by the river on Sabbath morning. We don't know how they discovered that. Maybe in their inquiries that they made, some have suggested that Luke, who it would seem accompanied them, may have actually been from Philippi. And if that's the case, he would have had many ways of discovering these things. We don't really know how they discovered, but they discovered that this was somewhere they could go to find those who were seeking to worship God, those who were willing and would be interested to hear the message that they had brought. And it is there, outside the city gates, on a Sabbath morning, by the river, that they meet Lydia. Now, what can we say about Lydia? What can we learn from Lydia? Well, there's three things I want to highlight or bring to your attention, three things that we can learn from Lydia. The first thing I want us to notice is that she was in the right place, and we might add, at the right time. She was in the right place at the right time. We'll think about that in a moment.

She also heard the right message, and then finally she responded in the right way. So, she was in the right place, and she heard the right message, and she responded in the right way. And the significance of each of these statements that we could think of purely descriptively, in terms of, well, what does the passage say in reference to these statements? And we will do that, but perhaps to tease out a little more the significance or the meaning of these things, we'll ask the question, why? Why was she in the right place? Why did she hear the right message? And why did she respond in the right way? So, let us proceed considering this passage and this account of this woman, Lydia, in this way. First of all, she was in the right place at the right time. What better place than the place of prayer? That is where she was. She was at the place of prayer. Now, this is a term that is used on other occasions to describe a synagogue building as the place of prayer. But here, as we've already discovered, it doesn't describe a building.

It doesn't describe a synagogue. It describes literally what the words say, a place of prayer. It didn't need a building. It didn't need some sacred space. It was the place where people gathered to pray.

It was the people that made it a place of prayer. And of course, that in itself is something for us to be clear on and to be reminded of, that a place of prayer is not essentially a building or sacred space. It is any place where worshipers of the living and true God gather to praise and to pray.

[9 : 38] That is how Lydia herself is described, as a worshiper of God. And no doubt, the woman who accompanied her could be equally so described, they were worshipers of God. They were worshipers of the true God. And when they gathered with the intention of seeking God and of praising God and of crying out to God, their gathering in that place, whatever it was, made that place a place of prayer. Now, as it happens, they chose this particular place that it would seem it was their regular habit to go to. And so, it was known in this way as the place of prayer. And that is where Lydia was. She was in the place of prayer. She was in the right place. It was also the place where she would, that Sabbath morning, that Sabbath morning, hear the message that would be brought by Paul concerning the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ. She was in the right place. She had a ringside seat to hear this message about Jesus. Lydia was in the right place, the place of prayer. Before we move on, I ask you the question, what about you? Is this a place that you frequent, the place of prayer? Now, you might reasonably respond to that question, well, that's a silly question because I'm not here. I'm in this church building. I've come to this service. Isn't it obvious that being in the place of prayer is important to me? Were it not, I wouldn't be here.

But we have already made the point that the place of prayer isn't in the first instance a building. The place of prayer is the place where we gather with the intention of praising God and praying to God and seeking God's help in humble and urgent recognition of our need of Him. And so, I ask you, have you gathered in that spirit? Have you gathered with that intention to hear what God has to say to you, to seek God's help, to seek forgiveness for your sins, to cry out to Him for the help that you need? Is that why you have gathered here this morning? But back to Lydia. Why was she at the place of prayer? She was in the right place, but why was she there? We can answer that at two levels. We can think, first of all, of Lydia herself, and then we can think also of God and God's involvement in her being there. Well, from Lydia's perspective, we can say that she was there at the place of prayer because she very commendably chose to be there. She was, in many ways, an unlikely candidate. She was not, it would seem, a Jewess.

We're told that she was from Thyatira in Asia. She was, again, it would appear, a woman of means who, I imagine, had plenty to do on a Sabbath morning. And yet, she chose to be there. It was, it would seem, her habit to spend that time on a Sabbath morning with these other women at the place of prayer. That was her choice. Nobody was twisting her arm. She voluntarily chose to be there.

And that does rather introduce the interesting question or speculation, I suppose, as to how it was that she had come to that desire to be at the place of prayer. Presumably, at some point in her life, she had begun to ask the big questions. She had sought the big answers. She was concerned for her soul. And she had a deep desire to know and to please God. I think all of these things we can reasonably conclude on the basis of the information that we have. And she chose, at some point in her life, to embrace the God of Israel. She hadn't been brought up in that way, but this was her choice so to do. And that is why, on this Sabbath morning, she was at the place of prayer.

Well, that from Lydia's perspective, but from God's perspective, we can very clearly see how God had ordered the circumstances on that Sabbath morning so that Lydia would be in the right place at the right time. And God had ordered those circumstances in a way that Lydia perhaps knew little of, her own life history and personal circumstances. Again, we don't know what those circumstances were that brought her to the place of seeking out the God of Israel. Might it have been the loss of a husband? It would seem that she was a widow. Might that have been what drove her, or in any case, gave her the opportunity? We don't know. But what we do know is that God had ordered the circumstances of her life, and indeed, He had ordered this very encounter. He had ordered and arranged the circumstances that she would be in the right place at the right time. Had no vision been granted to Paul, well, there would have been no message about Jesus that Sabbath morning. Had the journey from Troas taken longer than the two days that it took them? We notice two or three chapters further on in Acts, when they make the return journey, that the same journey took five days. Presumably, weather conditions or the boat that they got into, we don't know. But it took two days. It took just the right time so that they would be able to meet with Lydia that Sabbath morning. Lydia could easily have been on a business trip or ill-disposed this particular weekend, but it was not so. God had ordered the circumstances of her life, and indeed of many people's lives, that that morning she would be in the right place at the right time. God had graciously determined that it would be so, because He wished to do her good. And nothing has changed. God is still the God who orders the circumstances of our lives, that He might do us good. And indeed, this very morning, if you are here, it is because God has so ordered the circumstances of your life that you should be in the right place at the right time to hear about Jesus. And be very clear that that is why you are here. You can give me a host of reasons why you are here. And at one level, they may be entirely valid. And yet, be assured that ultimately you are here in the right place at the right time, because God wishes to do you good.

[17 : 03] So, she was in the right place. But secondly, she heard the right message. What was this message that she heard? Well, in the passage, it's simply described as Paul's message. She heard Paul's message. There in verse 14, the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. Well, what was Paul's message? Well, he himself answers that question sometime subsequently when he described, in a nutshell, in a nutshell, his message. He did so in this way, but we preach Christ crucified.

Paul's message was the good news concerning Jesus Christ. And as we discover the manner in which Paul announces this message as we follow his steps through the book of Acts, we can discover that this message, Paul's message included four central ingredients that we will have to very briefly run through. Paul's message, this message that Lydia heard, this right message that she heard, included these four elements. First of all, it was a message about God, a message about who God is and what he's like. Now, the stress on this aspect of the message of who God is and what he is like would, as we discover, as we follow Paul, would vary according to his audience. Very particularly when he was preaching to Gentiles, he would lay stress on this matter of who God is, that there is indeed only one living and true God, the creator of all that there is. And this very particular truth concerning God that he is the only living and true God and the creator God, and that as such, the implication of that is that we are his creatures and are absolutely dependent on and answerable to him, was one of the fundamental elements of this gospel message that Paul preached.

God has a claim on you as your creator. But this message, Paul's message that Lydia responded to, it was a message about God. It was also a message about sin. It was a message that explained that we are sinners. It was a message that helped men and women to understand the effects and consequences of sin on ourselves, on ourselves, on our own lives, on the lives of others, and crucially, on the manner in which it breaks the relationship we can enjoy with God. This message concerning our sin and the gravity of it is used by God to produce in the hearer a sense of his own need of a Savior, a sense of his own unworthiness, of his own sinfulness, what sometimes is described as conviction of sin as we are made aware of the gravity of sin and of our own responsibility for our sin. This message, Paul's message, was a message about God, but it was also a message about the human condition and of the great need that that human condition has. But centrally, it was a message about Jesus. It was a message about the promised Messiah that Lydia and her companions knew something of. They knew that there was one who had been promised who would come and who would bring salvation. And this message of Paul was a message about Jesus. Indeed, as we simply look forward to chapter 17, when Paul arrives in Thessalonica, and there we're given, in a sense, a summary of his message. Then in verse 2 we read, as his custom was,

Paul went into the synagogue. On this occasion there was a synagogue. And on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ, the promised one, the Messiah, had to suffer and rise from the dead. This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ. His message, Paul's message, the message that Lydia heard and understood and responded to was a message about Jesus. A message about who Jesus is, the eternal Son of God, the promised Messiah. A message about what Jesus Jesus has done, how He has come to solve the problem of our sin, how He came to die on the cross in the place of sinners, taking upon Himself the punishment and the judgment of God that we are due, that we might be freed from it as we would put our trust in Him. A message about Jesus, how He has responded to and provided solution to the problem of our sin, how He has dealt with my sin and your sin on Calvary's tree. A message about God, a message about sin, a message about Jesus, but a message that must necessarily also include a summons, an invitation to faith and repentance. That not only we would listen to these things, but that we would respond to these things, but that we would respond to the invitation that is graciously laid out before us, that we might be forgiven, that we might be welcomed into the family of God, that we might be restored to the life in all its fullness that it is God's purpose for us to live.

This is the message that Lydia heard on that Sabbath morning outside the city gate by the river. Why did she hear the right message?

[22 : 52] Well, firstly, and very obviously, and thank God, because there is a right message to be heard. There is a message that responds to the human condition. There is a message that is absolutely true, and the message that you need to hear and respond to. There is a right message. There is not a multiplicity of messages for you to choose from at your whim. No, there is a right message, the message of God concerning His Son, Jesus. That is why she heard the right message, because there is such a message. But maybe even more wonderfully, because God loved Lydia, and God had fixed His eyes upon her to save her. And so He made sure that she heard the right message. And so I ask you, is this a message that you have heard concerning God, concerning your sin, concerning Jesus, and what He has done for you? Have you heard the invitation, the summons to repent and believe?

And if you have, then listen to this third lesson that we can learn from Lydia. Not only was Lydia in the right place, not only did Lydia hear the right message, but Lydia responded in the right way.

She responded in the right way. Well, how did she respond? The passage tells us. Indeed, the very verb is used there in verse 14, one of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

She responded. Although it is interesting that the manner in which the church Bible that we are using translates this verb, that she responded, that her heart was open to respond, is maybe stretching a little what the original verb means. The original verb, and this is the way it is translated in other versions, is that the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to Paul's message, that she would take heed to Paul's message, that she would listen carefully to Paul's message. This is what God did. He enabled her to pay attention to the message, and so respond. Clearly, as she not paid attention, as she paid no notice to it, it would have been impossible to respond, but she was enabled to pay attention.

And as she paid attention, so she responded. And how did she respond? Beyond simply listening, though that is, of course, very important. How did she respond? Well, we can say three things.

[25 : 41] Not three separate things, but three distinct things that go together. I hope makes sense. First of all, she believed. She herself uses that language there in verse 15. If you consider me a believer in the Lord, in the Lord Jesus, this Jesus of whom I have just heard spoken, if you consider me a believer, come and stay at my house. And what did Paul and Silas do? They went to stay at her house.

They obviously did consider her a believer. She responded by believing the message. She put her trust in Jesus. She responded to the invitation that was given to her, that her sins might be forgiven, and that she might be granted new life. She believed.

Her response also involved obeying. Now, believing in itself was an act of obedience. That's why I say that these are not to be understood in very distinct ways. But in order to tease out the elements, we can make the distinction. She believed, but she obeyed.

And very particularly, I make reference to that in connection with her baptism. In verse 15, we're told, when she and the members of her household were baptized. Now, why was she baptized?

Well, it's clear the message that Paul gave spoke of the need for baptism. The message that Paul gave evidently explained that those who believe in Jesus demonstrate that obedience by being baptized, by obeying this demand, this requirement to be baptized. And so that is what she does. It was a way of demonstrating the genuineness of her belief, obeying this requirement, this immediate obedience, and this public obedience. To be baptized was to declare publicly, certainly to all her household, and it would seem to many more beyond, that she was now a disciple of Jesus. A public profession of her faith in Jesus Christ was one of the elements of this act of obedience in being baptized together with her household. And that remains a requirement for those who today would respond to the message concerning Jesus Christ, that we would put our trust in Jesus, and that we would obey Jesus in a multiplicity of ways, including His demand that we publicly profess our faith in Him. She believed, she obeyed, and she also served her newfound Lord. She opened her home for the purposes of the kingdom for the purposes of the kingdom. We're told there how she invited Paul and

[28 : 26] Silas and the others who were with them, that they would stay at her house, and everything would suggest that subsequently her house became the gathering place for the nascent church there in Philippi.

Her home, her house, her financial, her material resources, her time placed at the disposition of the Lord Jesus.

She responded in the right way. She believed in Jesus. She put her trust in Jesus. She obeyed Jesus. She served Jesus. And these things together constitute a right response to the gospel invitation. And indeed, these things, these three elements must be found together. A helpful way of inquiring of ourselves as to whether we believe is to ask this question, do I obey? Do I, sir? And if we can't answer in the affirmative to these questions than we would have to seriously ask ourselves if we do believe at all.

But as we draw things to a close, we ask this question that we've asked already of the previous points that have been made. Why did she respond in the right way? She most certainly did, and we celebrate that fact, but why? Why did she respond in the right way? Well, from the perspective of Lydia, we can say, and this is a right and true description of the events, she was in the right place. She paid attention to the message that Paul brought.

She considered it. She gave it thought. She came to conclusions. It made sense. It all tied together. It was coherent to her understanding. And as she considered what had been said, as she contemplated on what the message said concerning God, concerning her own condition, concerning the person of Jesus, as she considered these things, she came to a conclusion. She decided to put her trust in Jesus, and that is what she did. Others who were there with her, I imagine, though we don't know, perhaps others who were there chose not to do so. They also listened.

[30 : 41] They also considered, but came to a different conclusion, or so it may have been. All this is true. But as we consider Lydia's response, as we consider how Lydia responded in the right way from God's perspective, well, the language that we have before us is crystal clear.

What are we told in this verse? The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. It was the Lord who opened her heart to pay attention, to take heed, to consider the message that was being brought.

Without the work of God in the heart of man, we cannot believe. The outward call of the gospel must be accompanied by the inward call of the Spirit. It's not only that we need the help of God to exercise saving faith, which is true, but not the point I would contend is being made here, but we need the help of God even to pay attention and adequately understand the gospel message.

There may be here folks this morning, and I say this solemnly, who come and go, and it's as if nothing had happened, as if nothing had been said concerning their condition, as if nothing had been said concerning their eternal destiny, they will leave this place as they came in. I trust that that is not so, but it may well be so.

I pray to God that it would not be so. But we recognize that for us to even pay attention, and to take heed of, and to appreciate the importance of the matters being considered, we seek God's help, that God would open our hearts, that God would enable us to hear, and to understand, and to respond. But as we recognize that that is indeed needful, we also recognize, and we give thanks to God, that He is more than willing to grant us the help that we need. And as He would grant us the help that we need to pay attention, to take heed, to understand, and to respond, then would we, with Lydia, do just that, and respond to the message that is brought, that we would respond to the invitation that is given, as we believe and put our trust in Jesus, as we obey His commandments upon our lives, and as we offer up our lives in willing, and grateful, and joyful service to the One who has saved us. God grant that it would be so for us all this morning.

[33 : 30] Let us pray.