

Responding Rightly Acts 16:11-15

Introduction

How many of you really like surprises?

I have to admit that I am not a big fan of surprises or of things not going as I expect them to go

I tend to be a creature of habit and I tend to have set ideas of how things should be and my typical reaction to things not going according to my internal script is to go negative

Change and uncertainty are not allies of mine and I have to really work at going with the flow

Are any of you kindred spirits in that regard?

Today's passage spoke to me and informed me in this regard and I trust today's message will benefit those of you who also struggle with things not going according to plan

Last week when we looked at Acts 15:36-16:10 we saw how we should respond when our plans don't work out

In those verses we saw how Paul and his team faced disagreements, distractions, and diversions and still they remained true to the mission of Christ and carried on with it

Faced with an insurmountable difference of opinion, Barnabas took John Mark and took his ministry to Cyprus while Paul took Silas and headed for Asia Minor and in so doing the ministry effort was doubled showing God's ability to use even strong disagreement and division to further his ends

We saw how when Paul and Silas arrived in Lystra they decided that Timothy should join their team and how Paul removed a potential for distraction by circumcising Timothy before they went on to evangelize knowing that his uncircumcised state would be an issue in the synagogues

When we left off Paul, Silas, and now Timothy were in Troas having been directed there through a series of "false starts" toward areas into which the Holy Spirit didn't want them to go at that time

While they were in Troas Paul received a vision of a man from Macedonia calling out for the team to come and help them

Therefore, the team conferred and came to the conclusion that God was directing them to Macedonia and they were seeking to go across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia - or Europe as we know it

As we pick up the account today we will see that they secure passage across the Aegean, make the voyage, and begin their ministry in Macedonia

We will also see that things don't exactly go as the team likely expected they would

Have you ever felt quite sure that God was calling you to do something but when you began, it just didn't seem to go as you expected it would?

Where the details were all wrong and you questioned whether you had understood God's leading correctly?

That's the position Paul and the others find themselves in and in this account we see some very valuable insights as to how to handle those sorts of situations

You will notice that I have broken the passage down into two main headings

The first is **Lessons from Paul** and the second is **Lessons from Lydia**

The actions and reactions of both of these individuals are quite instructive for us as they model how to handle circumstances that don't quite square with our expectations

I titled this sermon **Responding Rightly** because it's important that we learn to respond rather than react when things don't go just like we think they should

I recently read an article written by a former fighter pilot about the difference between reacting and responding to a situation - and how the distinction between those two responses was crucial especially in situations that are unexpected

The gist of the article was that responses are thought out, planned, and practiced in advance so that they can be applied with intention and purpose whereas reactions are often reflexive and ill advised and usually serve to make things worse rather than better

In planning a response a person focuses on what is crucial to remember when remembering is difficult thereby making a proper response more natural and automatic when the unexpected happens.

What that means for us in light of this passage is that we will do well to note how Paul and Lydia handled the situations as they unfolded so that we might learn how to plan for the unexpected and then respond rightly rather than react poorly when we come up against the unexpected

Because oftentimes the greatest hindrance to our ministry is our own expectation of how it should be

Let's open our Bibles to Acts 16 and you can follow along as I read verses 11-15 (**Acts 16:11-15**)

So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. 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. 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. 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.

Background details

As we begin let's look at some details that will help us as we go on

The trip across the Aegean from Troas to Neapolis was roughly 150 miles and the island of Samothrace lay almost exactly at the mid-way point distance-wise

Samothrace is a mountainous island whose tallest peak rises some 5,500 feet about sea level and in Paul's day it was the home to a very popular mystery cult

Samothrace didn't have a good port but there was a place for safe anchorage just off the northern coast and many ships would anchor there simply because it was so dangerous to sail at night

We can't even be sure that Paul and the others left the ship to go ashore since outsiders weren't exactly welcomed to the island because of the secretive practices of the mystery cult that called Samothrace home

They sailed on the next day to Neapolis and then travelled overland to Philippi

Philippi was a city about 10 miles inland from Neapolis and Luke informs us that it was a Roman colony

The population of Philippi consisted largely of retired Roman military men and served as a loyal outpost in the region

It was under Roman law and its constitution was modeled after the municipal constitution of Rome - in fact Philippi was considered to be Rome away from Rome or as it was referred to at the time "Little Rome"

And whereas Rome tended to be somewhat tolerant of most religious beliefs they were very intolerant of foreign religions that might disturb the order of things and Philippi apparently had the same attitude as we will see

Then, we could easily read right past another significant fact in **verse 11** if we're not careful to note it

Notice that Luke uses the pronoun "we" for the first time indicating that he has joined the team at this point

Luke is a very conscientious reporter of what he sees as important to note and he is very shy about calling attention to himself so we have to pay attention to these "we" passages when they pop up as he joins and leaves the team at various points

I. Lessons from Paul

With those few background details in mind let's see what lessons we can learn from Paul

A. Submit to Providence

The first lesson we should take from this account is that we should Submit to Providence

In other words, we must be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit and go where God directs and do what God commands

We have already seen this attitude demonstrated by Paul quite clearly as he knew that God wanted him to take the gospel to the Gentiles in new places - so he went

And we saw how he kept going in spite of being providentially turned back time and again as God was directing him where he wanted the team to go

Paul had to submit without knowing the end result because God chose to not reveal their destination until they ran out of land and only when they had submitted in obedience to the hilt did God send the vision showing the next step

As much as we might wish it wasn't so, God often does this same thing in our lives too because being forced to trust him when we don't know the end of a matter is beneficial to us

I remember trying to convince my daughters that if they would jump off something or other that I would catch them and they wouldn't get hurt

I could see the conflict in their little eyes as they wanted to trust me but weren't absolutely certain that they could...

Until they finally let loose and jumped into my waiting arms and from that moment on I had to be very careful that they didn't jump when I wasn't expecting them to

Because through that initial bout of overcoming their fear and finding that they could entrust their well-being to me they developed faith in my ability to catch them and were able to exhibit that trust again later

Paul clearly trusted God's leading without question or hesitation or grumbling as he changed his course and continued on in another direction all the way until he reached the sea

On to Macedonia

And now he had to trust God's leading again as he sensed the call to go to Macedonia

It's impossible to know whether Paul recognized just how large this next step was

We know that he found out just how different things were from what he had thus far experienced when he got to Philippi

Up to now they had been ministering in somewhat familiar territory

Barnabas was originally from Cyprus and Paul had come from Tarsus in Asia Minor and they had ministered largely where there was an established Jewish presence - but it wouldn't be that way once they got to Macedonia

And still Paul and the others wasted no time in getting there as it appears they booked immediate passage

In **verse 11** Luke uses a phrase that isn't readily recognizable by us living here in the Midwest

He writes that they made a "direct voyage" which is a nautical term meaning that they had the wind at their backs and so there were able to make a straight line to Samothrace without a lot of tacking back and forth against contrary winds

He says they made the entire voyage to Neapolis in **two days** whereas when he reports the same trip in reverse in **Acts 20:6** he says the trip took **five days**

Clearly Luke is conveying that God was with them as he hastened their voyage to Macedonia

And when they arrived at Neapolis which was the coastal city that served as the port for Philippi they wasted no time in walking overland the 10 or so miles to Philippi where they likely didn't find what they expected to find

Philippi

Picture the scene as they arrived at Philippi and realized there was no synagogue there and their ministry plan was derailed – remember how Paul’s pattern was to go first to the synagogue to present the gospel

Scholars widely agree that there was most likely no synagogue because Philippi had a very low Jewish population

According to Jewish law 10 male heads of households had to be available in order to establish a synagogue and no amount of women could make up for the lack of even one man

There are a couple of possible explanations for the low number of Jews in Philippi

One reason could be because Philippi was a pagan city that simply might not have been attractive to the Jews

Or the citizens of Philippi, mostly ex Roman military men and their families, might have been inhospitable to the Jews

Remember, Claudius had given an edict expelling all Jews from Rome and it's entirely possible that the same edict was carried out in "Little Rome" as well

Whatever the reason was, Paul found himself on unfamiliar ground as he had to change his practice of going first to the Jews in the synagogue in each city he visited

Possible reactions

Think of all the possible ways Paul could have reacted to finding himself in a city that had a healthy dose of hostility toward people like him and no convenient place to begin ministering

He could have easily been stopped in his tracks, he could have fumed and fussed about it, he could have begun to think that he had made a wrong turn somewhere and was now outside of God’s will

The number of unprofitable reactions Paul could have engaged in is limited only by our imagination

But Paul had learned through his prior experiences to trust that God would direct him where he wanted him and would prevent him from going where he shouldn’t and Paul was able to **submit to God’s providence**

B. Serve Where Sent

Paul was confident that Philippi was where God had directed him to minister so he set about to do just that and in his example we see that the proper response when we find ourselves in unexpected circumstances or surrounding is that we must **Serve Where Sent** regardless of whether or not it meets with our expectations

The practice of the Jews was to establish what was known as a "place of prayer" in cities without a formal synagogue so when the Sabbath rolled around Paul and the others went to try to find it – merely on the supposition that one would exist

Generally, these places of prayer would be established outside of the city and were open-air affairs situated by a river in order to make convenient the ritual washing necessary for proper Jewish worship

And at Philippi they found just such a place by the Gangites River about a mile and a half from the city

So far so good, right?

I mean, things aren't ideal with there being no synagogue and all but here was the place of prayer where they could minister

It was an unexpectedly unfavorable start but at least now they could get sbusyrepresenting the gospel to whatever men there were

The Women

Imagine the surprise of Paul and his team as they approached to find only women gathered there

While we will see that Paul and his co-laborers didn't agree, the popular sentiment of his day among devout Jews was that it would be better to burn the Law than to teach it to a woman

Paul was no chauvinist but he had to be scratching his head a bit

After all, God had given him the vision of a man from Macedonia beckoning and calling for help – so, where was he?

God had sped them across the Aegean with favorable winds but since then things had kind of gone sideways

Put yourself in Paul's place

Wouldn't you be wondering if you took a wrong turn somewhere and maybe coming to Philippi was a mistake?

What kept Paul from turning around and plotting a course to a new city?

I believe it was because Paul lived close to the Lord and he was very sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit

Look back at what he had just recently been through as he travelled around Asia Minor being restricted and thereby directed by the Holy Spirit

In light of that experience why would he think that God would let him go to the wrong place now?

Generally, when one is seeking to live according to God's will and committed to it - God's will becomes rather easy to discern

When you regularly ask God to keep you in the center of his will and to lead you to ministry opportunities there is rarely any need to pray about occasions for ministry that arise -

Because if you have already prayed it doesn't make sense not to see the opportunity as the answer

Paul didn't react to a circumstance that was radically different than he was expecting he responded according to what he knew to be true

Paul knew his God-given mission was to spread the gospel and he knew that God had led him to this place so he sat down and talked to those the Lord put before him

These women were most likely a group of Gentile proselytes to Judaism given that there were few or no Jewish men in Philippi and it would be unlikely for a Jewish woman to live there alone

And here they were trying to remain as faithful as they could to what they knew as they met together on the Sabbath to pray

Given the absence of a proper synagogue and the religious leadership that it would provide they must have been thrilled to have Paul and the rest come join their group and actually sit down to speak to them

Remember Paul was a rabbi and he might well have been dressed as such on this Sabbath morning as he, Silas, Timothy, and Luke all arrived at the prayer meeting already in progress

And in **verse 14** we are introduced to Lydia who becomes Paul's first convert on the continent of Europe

II. Lessons from Lydia

Let's read that verse again as we prepare to see what lessons we can learn from Lydia

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.

Lydia is a Greek name which likely confirms that she was a Gentile and we see that she is originally from the city of Thyatira which is kind of ironic given that it lies in one of the regions Paul was prevented from witnessing in

Thyatira was a city in Asia Minor located in the province of Lydia and it was well known for two things

Its rampant paganism and its trade guilds one of which was the guild of dyers who made purple dye either from the secretions of a particular snail or from the madder root

In either case, the purple dye was difficult to make and quite costly which made a pound of fabric dyed with it worth a pound of gold

And we see here that Lydia is a seller of "purple goods" which indicates she was a business woman who either sold purple dye, or purple cloth, or even items made from purple cloth which meant that she was likely quite wealthy

Luke also tells us that she was a "worshiper of God" which means the God of Israel making her a proselyte to Judaism either formally or informally - **in other words she was a devoutly religious person**

Her devotion to God is demonstrated by her willingness to close her business on the Sabbath to take time for worship

Remember, she lived in Philippi and the Sabbath wasn't a holiday there so taking time for God meant the sacrifice of at least some portion of her trade and could have very likely opened her up for ridicule by her neighbors

And it's more than likely that some if not most or all of the women with her were her servants or employees based on the way the rest of the account is written

It's impossible for us to know whether Lydia was or ever had been married or whether she had a family of her own

Scripture is silent on the matter but the way Luke describes the dialogue it would seem likely that she was a woman on her own and that her "household" consisted of those who worked for her

So here we have a woman who is a God-fearing, Gentile businesswoman of some means who is gathered together with a group of women praying by a river on the Sabbath when Paul and the other men began to speak with them

A. Heed What You Hear

Notice what Luke says happens next - "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul."

We know Paul well enough by this point to know that what he said was that Jesus was the Messiah and how one can be reconciled to God through the cross of Christ

And God caused her to understand and accept what Paul said so that she was saved

Our modern understanding of the phrase "to pay attention to" means something like to listen intently

But the Greek here means much more than that

It means to hear with effect or to be changed by what is heard

In other words Lydia heard what Paul taught, she believed it, and she acted in faith to accept it

In other places in the New Testament this same Greek word is translated as "devoted" –

Lydia was changed and she became devoted to the Lord in a far deeper sense than she previously had been

There are a couple of lessons we need to take note of with Lydia's conversion

First, it's possible to be a God-fearing even godly person without actually being saved

Sadly churches today are filled with people just like that

People who by all outward appearances love the Lord and are trying to live to please him but they are just as lost as the vilest pagan who curses and defies God because in spite of their desire to please God they have never accepted the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and made him the Lord of their life

And the tragedy is we are fooled by the facade and don't realize that they are quite possibly self-deluded and most certainly condemned

But in the case of Lydia we see that we must **heed what we hear**

Surely that's true when we hear of our need for salvation

Lydia could have easily thought she had it all together

She was **successful, wealthy, and religious** - who were these outsiders telling her that wasn't good enough?

But God called her and caused her to understand and accept the gospel as Paul shared it

Paul's part in Lydia's conversion was to preach the gospel

Let's look quickly at **Romans 1:14-17** which Doris read for us a bit ago

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? **And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?** And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" **So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.**

If people are going to believe someone has to tell them about Jesus and that was Paul's mission

But salvation itself requires God opening up a person's heart to give them understanding and the ability to accept

We see that truth also in **John 6:44** where Jesus teaches

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.

Paul preached the gospel, the Father opened Lydia's heart, the Lord gave Lydia the ability to understand and accept – he opened her heart to the gospel - and Lydia accepted what Paul taught and was saved

What about us?

If you have not yet accepted Christ as Lord and Savior the application of this part of the passage is clear

You need to heed God's call to salvation and accept the payment Jesus made on your behalf by his death on the Cross and you need to acknowledge his divinity and his right to rule your life and commit to following him as Lord

Now assuming you are already a believer in the true sense you might wonder that this point has to do with you

You also need to heed what you hear and do what God tells you to do

God speaks through his Word and in Scripture we find many examples of general commands to follow

But God also speaks through his Word as interpreted by the Holy Spirit in each person's life and circumstance and gives individual commands that must be heeded

We all know there are things that God wants us to do that we don't want to do and so we find excuses not to do them

But God is not mocked and we won't be able to say at the Bema Seat that we didn't know - God searches and knows our heart and he knows well what we know we should do – **heed what you hear**

B. Exemplify What You've Experienced

Lydia saw what her response to the gospel should be and she heeded what she heard but she didn't stop there and in the remaining verses we see that she shows us how we must **exemplify what we've experienced**

Without skipping a beat Luke reports that Lydia was **immediately baptized** upon her profession of faith

Perhaps she was baptized in the Gangites River next to the place of prayer

Not content to have Jesus as Savior she demonstrated publicly that she wanted to be obedient to him as Lord

In doing this Lydia followed the pattern we've seen so often in Acts to this point of being baptized virtually immediately upon one's profession of faith

Notice too that she was baptized along with her "household" which would mean whatever family she might have had but more likely meaning those servants and employees who were with her at the place of prayer so **Lydia was an influencer for Christ right out of the gate**

As a real quick side note look down at **verse 40** where Luke relates that after Paul and Silas got out of prison - which we'll look at next time we're together - they went to see Lydia and departed after they had seen and encouraged "the brothers"

And we have to ask, what "brothers?"

It seems that Lydia just might have been busy evangelizing while they were in prison

That's a bit of conjecture but the brothers had to come from somewhere

But what we do know is that Lydia began to practice **Christian hospitality** after she was saved

In a way she painted Paul and Silas and the others into a corner by saying to refuse her offer of hospitality would be to judge her as not really being saved

She was insistent and she prevailed showing that she wasn't afraid of letting people know of her new association with these folks called Christians which was a brave thing to do in a place like Philippi

In James 1 we read how good deeds serve as practical proof of genuine conversion and Lydia certainly showed that she was a changed woman

What about us?

Being a Christian should show

If we are truly Christ-followers people should be able to tell because we should be different

People should know us by our works as James tells us, they should know us by our love as Jesus taught, and they should know us because we are eager to tell them about our Savior

Conclusion

Things don't always go as we expect them too even when we know that we are following God's leading

The key is knowing that we are indeed following God's leading and that means walking with God all the time and not just when facing big decisions

But if we are convinced that we are where God would have us then we need to face those things that seem oddly out of line with our expectations

And we can do that successfully if we have prepared ourselves to respond and not just react to those things

Again, we do that by relying on God daily and by remembering his faithfulness in times past

Doing that will enable us to submit to God's sovereignty, to serve wherever we're sent, to heed what we hear God telling us to do, and thereby exemplify what we've experienced to a watching world