



Philippians:
Finding joy
in
Lockdown

Having finished our series in Philippians last Sunday, we looked this week at Acts 16v11-40 – Paul's visit to Philippi, in which he established the Philippian church.

From the beginning of this account it diverges from the pattern typical in Acts. Rather than Paul and his companions preaching publicly in the synagogue, with Luke recording the content of their message and the corporate response to it, we see two individual stories: two individuals who heard the gospel, responded to God's message and were saved – in very different circumstances!

Lydia's story (v11-15)

In many ways, Lydia was a model candidate who had a model conversion – she was already a worshipper of God, was willing to listen, and she responded immediately (in baptism and hospitality).

However, Luke includes a crucial sentence in v14 – “*The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message*”. On her own, Lydia didn't stand a chance. There was nothing inevitable or automatic about her coming to faith, nor was it because of Paul's human powers of rhetoric and/or persuasion. The reason she became a Christian was that God opened her heart to the gospel.

Our hearts, according to Luke, are like closed doors. We cannot open them ourselves. We need a miracle from God if our hearts are to be opened, that we might respond to his message. Fortunately, this is exactly what God is in the business of doing!

The jailer's story (v16-40)

The second conversion takes up much more of the narrative and is rather more dramatic! Paul and Silas are unjustly thrown into prison after casting an evil spirit out of a slave girl (v23). God sends an earthquake to open the doors (v26). But on seeing that the jailer is about to fall on his sword Paul intervenes (v28). In his astonishment, the jailer asks the killer question, v32: “*What must I do to be saved?*”.

As with Lydia, Christ's name is preached and we see an immediate response of faith. God opens another heart to his gospel.

The contrast between the two is particularly fascinating: Lydia who seemed so “close” to being saved, and the jailer who seemed so far. Yet both needed a miracle. God dramatically intervened to open closed hearts and create founding members of this Philippian church who could not have been more different from each other!

Here are some possible questions to help apply this passage. As always feel free to adapt as needed for your group.

- What light does this passage shed on the Philippian church Paul later wrote his letter to?
- How does this passage lead us to reflect on our “salvation stories” or testimonies?
- What does this account teach of us of the joy we have heard so much of in Philippians?
- How do we slip into following religion instead of the gospel – thinking we need to work for God's love and approval?
(to see the same idea in a different context you could have a look at Galatians 3v3)
- How do the conversions we see here both encourage us to and challenge us in our evangelism?
How are you finding sharing the gospel at the moment?