

## When What You Get Isn't What You Signed Up For...

Acts 16:9-15

How do you respond when God—or life itself—changes your plans? Truth is everyone at some point in life will make plans that suddenly and unexpectedly change. Maybe for a day or a season, maybe even for your life.

So how do you respond to unexpected disappointments or sudden changes in your plans? How you respond will, in large part, depend on your trust in God and your commitment to place your life in God's hands and to let God use you for His work.

If you've ever questioned God's will for your life, if you've ever thought that your life just took an unexpected detour, then you appreciate our lesson from Acts 16 this morning. Paul and Silas and Timothy discovered that sometimes God's will looks like an unexpected detour or a closed door.

And how we respond to these unexpected moments, those closed doors, says a great deal about our belief in God and how God can use us to accomplish His will.

Anne Graham Lotz, Billy Graham's daughter, once wrote that when she faces a difficult situation or a closed door, she doesn't ask God, "Why?" It doesn't do any good to ask why, she says. Instead, she asks, "What are you trying to teach me through this, Lord?" Certain things we have to trust to faith and leave in God's hands as we trust God's goodness.

God's ways are higher than our ways, and God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts. If you wait around for God to answer the question, "Why?" you'll end up bitter and find yourself withdrawing from God. But if you change the question to "What are you trying to teach me through this, Lord?" you'll remain open to God's will and to God's work in and through you.

So Anne Graham Lotz asks the question, "What are you trying to teach me through this, Lord?" because she knows that God is still working in every circumstance, no matter how strange or painful it may seem at the moment.

So here's the central question for today: **Do you expect God to do something important with your life?** Do you believe God has a purpose for you? There is a little booklet titled *Letters on the Healing Ministry* by Dr. Albert Day. In this book Dr. Day says that most Christians suffer from a "poverty of expectation." Think about that phrase for a moment: "a poverty of expectation."

We don't expect God to do anything important in and through our lives. We think that God uses other people—smarter people, holier people, more talented people—to do His work. But not us.

God isn't going to work in and through us to change lives and bring people to salvation in Jesus Christ. One quote from the book that really challenges me reads like this, "Our chronic weakness is not that we expect too much from God, but that we trust Him for too little."

**Paul and his companions did not suffer from a poverty of expectation.** They trusted that God would act through them wherever they were. So, when Paul dreamed of a man from Macedonia begging for help, he and his companions headed straight in that direction and ended up in the city of Philippi. And they set out to find a group of Jewish men to share Jesus' message with. And once again, God changed their plans.

Paul and his men came across a small group of women gathered by a river, praying. Was this *really* God's big mission opportunity for them? After all women ranked low in power and standing in the society of that day. However, that's no problem for God as we have often seen. God works through all kinds of people in all kinds of circumstances.

The story is told of a small church in Costa Mesa, California in the 1960s located very near the beach. Several young people attended the church, some of whom hadn't attended church before. And one thing was obvious: they most certainly didn't know anything about dressing in your "Sunday best." In fact, many of them came directly from the beach to church on Sunday morning; some even walked in without shirts or shoes.

This wouldn't have been a problem, except that the beach had oil deposits in the sand, and oil clung to their bare feet, and they tracked oil on the church's new carpet. So they posted a sign on the door that said, "Shirts and shoes please" but soon realized that some would feel excluded from attending because of the sign and they might never come back.

Let's pause for a moment and think about that. What barriers do we place between God and the people around us? What limits do we place on God's work? Paul and his companions were committed to preaching the good news of Jesus Christ—to Jewish men.

Did God really change their grand missionary plans so they could preach to group of women? At least one of the women, a woman named Lydia, was even a Gentile. Was this unexpected and even uncomfortable situation really an opportunity from God?

Evidently, Paul and Silas and Timothy thought so. Because they sat down and began to speak to the women. And the Lord opened the heart of Lydia; and she and her entire household were baptized that day.

But let's get back to that church in Costa mesa and with the oily carpets. The pastor called a meeting of the church leaders who caught a vision of what God could do in and through them if they threw away their barriers and limitations and welcomed these young people without reservation to their church.

And they decided that if they had to tear out the pews and rip up the carpets to make those young people feel welcome, they'd do it. And God brought revival on that little church. They attracted the young people and they grew in vitality and spiritual maturity - all because they committed to removing any barriers that might keep people from hearing and receiving the word of God.

Which brings me to a final question for this morning, **will Providence obey God's calling even if we don't understand it?**

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is 2 Corinthians 5:19-20, "...**God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation ...**" [Listen carefully:] "**We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.**"

You see, God can't do much with a life that isn't committed to Him. God can't do much with believers who don't see every moment as an opportunity to do the work of Jesus in all circumstances. Because *those who put everything in God's hands eventually see God's hand in everything*. Which is just what Paul and his companions did—they put everything in God's hands, and they saw God's hand in everything.

So, let's finish our lesson for today. Lydia and her entire household were baptized that day, and they invited the men to stay at her house. Lydia started a small Christian church in her home, the first Christian church in the Western world. And it was from this small outpost in Philippi that the message of Jesus spread throughout Europe, and eventually to the U.S., and, eventually, to us today. It's amazing what God can do with just a few committed men and women.

God does His greatest work through ordinary people like you and me. If we really believe that, we will live in constant hope and expectation and joy. God places His greatest opportunities right in front of us, in the ordinary circumstances of our daily lives.