

Shalom AZ Ministries

In Pursuit of Israel's Redemption



"Even When I Can't See It, You're Working"

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Devotion and Discussion Questions

Key Texts (TLV): Phil. 1:1-3; Acts 16:1-15; Phil. 4:22

Have you ever watched an artist begin a picture and wondered what in the world he was doing? A line here, a smudge there, a little color in a place that does not seem to make sense—and for a while, you cannot discern the picture at all. But the artist can. He knows what he is drawing from the moment he begins. What looks confusing to you is not confusing to him. He does not need to crumple up the page and start over, because he already knows where every line is going. Eventually, what looked like a mess begins to come together into something beautiful.

That is the picture that comes to mind as we begin Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul writes from prison to a congregation he knows and loves, remembering where it all began. *"I thank my God at every memory of you"* (Phil. 1:3). Those memories would have taken him back to Acts 16, because Philippi had not originally been on Paul's radar at all. In fact, the masterpiece that became the congregation at Philippi began with closed doors, unanswered questions, and circumstances that did not look anything like Paul had planned. Yet through every part of it, the Master Artist was at work. Even when Paul could not see what the Lord was doing, the Lord knew exactly what He was doing.

1. SOMETIMES THE LORD'S "NO" IS PART OF HIS DIRECTION

Paul, Silas, and Timothy were not sitting around doing nothing. They were going forward with the Good News, praying for open doors and open hearts. Yet Acts tells us, *"They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been **forbidden by the Ruach ha-Kodesh** to speak the word in Asia"* (Acts 16:6). Then they tried another direction: *"When they came to Mysia, they were trying to proceed into Bithynia, but **the Ruach of Yeshua would not allow them**"* (Acts 16:7). One direction was closed, and then another was closed. We are not told exactly how the Spirit communicated those "no's," and apparently Paul was not given an explanation. He simply knew that the answer was no.

That had to be frustrating, especially because Paul was trying to do something good. He was not running from God; he was trying to preach the Word. And yet the Spirit said, "Not here. Not now." We know from what happened later that the Lord did have a significant work for Paul in Ephesus. In fact, Paul would eventually spend years there. But right now was not the time. The closed door did not mean Paul had misunderstood his calling, and it did not mean God had stopped working. Sometimes what feels like an obstacle is actually the Lord directing our steps. The important thing is that Paul did not try to force his way and kick the door open. He kept walking in obedience with the light the Lord had given him.

2. GOD MAY NOT SHOW US THE WHOLE PLAN—ONLY THE NEXT STEP

After two closed doors, the direction finally became clearer. *"Now a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man from Macedonia was standing and pleading with him, saying, 'Come over*

to Macedonia and help us!’ As soon as he had seen the vision, immediately we tried to go to Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the Good News to them” (Acts 16:9–10). Notice that the Lord did not explain every previous disappointment. He did not tell Paul why Asia had been closed or why Bithynia had been closed. He simply showed him where to go next. And once Paul understood that direction, they immediately went.

Looking backward, Paul could now see something that would have been impossible to see while those doors were closing. The “no” to Asia and the “no” to Bithynia were directing him toward the “yes” of Macedonia—and ultimately toward Philippi. Years later, as Paul wrote, *“I thank my God at every memory of you”* (Phil. 1:3), he could remember that journey differently. What once may have felt like disappointment after disappointment had actually been the hand of God leading him toward people he would deeply love. We often want the Lord to show us the entire picture before we obey the next step. But sometimes He simply says, “Not there,” and then, “Go here.” Faith trusts the Artist even before we can see what He is drawing.

3. GOD’S WORK MAY BEGIN DIFFERENTLY THAN WE EXPECTED

Paul received a vision of a man from Macedonia saying, “Come over and help us.” So Paul arrived in Macedonia, came to Philippi, and did what he normally did when entering a new city: he looked for the synagogue. But there was no synagogue. There were apparently not even enough Jewish men in Philippi to form a *minyan* (10 men). So on Yom Shabbat, Paul and the others went outside the city to the river, where they expected to find a place of prayer. *“We sat down and began speaking with the women who had gathered”* (Acts 16:13). Paul had received a vision of a Macedonian man, but when he arrived, the first person we are told about was a *woman* praying beside a river.

Her name was Lydia. She was a seller of purple cloth from Thyatira and a God-fearer—a woman who was already hungry for the things of God. *“The Lord opened her heart to respond to what Paul was saying”* (Acts 16:14). She was immersed along with her household, and then she opened her home to Paul and his companions. This was the beginning. The Lord had been preparing Lydia while He was directing Paul. When the Lord said “no” or “not now” to Asia and Bithynia, He was saying yes to Lydia. And in a religious world where a gathering of women was not even sufficient to establish a synagogue, the Lord chose to begin the congregation in Philippi with a God-fearing woman praying down by the river. The beginning did not look like Paul might have expected—but the Lord was working.

Conclusion

Paul could look back years later from a prison cell and see the picture much more clearly. The closed doors, the unexpected journey into Macedonia, the lack of a synagogue, the women beside the river, and Lydia’s open heart were all strokes on the same canvas. That is why the words Paul writes only a few verses later carry such weight: *“I am sure of this very thing—that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the Day of Messiah Yeshua”* (Phil. 1:6). The One who begins the work is also the One who brings it to its goal. We may not understand the lines He is drawing or the colors He is using, but He does. Even when we cannot see it, He is working.

Maybe you are in one of those places right now. You have prayed for an open door, and instead you have heard “no.” You thought you knew where the Lord was leading, and suddenly the road has changed. Or perhaps you have finally arrived where you believe He sent you, but it looks nothing like what you expected. Do not force the door. Do not abandon the canvas. Bring your disappointment, your confusion, and your plans before the Lord and surrender them again. And if you have never truly surrendered your life to Messiah Yeshua, begin there. Give Him the right to be Lord—to direct the journey, close the doors, open the doors, and write the story. The Master Artist knows what He is doing. Trust Him with the picture, even while you still cannot see it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do Paul and Timothy communicate about their allegiance when they introduce themselves as “*slaves of Messiah Yeshua*” in Phil. 1:1?
2. What do the closed doors in Acts 16:6–8 teach us about the way the Ruach ha-Kodesh can direct God’s people?
3. Why is Lydia’s story in Acts 16:13–15 such a significant beginning for the congregation at Philippi?
4. Where are you experiencing a closed door or a “not now” in your life? How might you respond in obedience rather than trying to force your own way?
5. Is there something God is doing in your life right now that does not look the way you expected it to look? What would it mean for you to trust that He is still at work?

CLOSING PRAYER

Abba, thank You that You see the finished picture when we can only see a few lines on the page. Help us to trust You when doors close, when Your direction does not make sense, and when the place You lead us looks different from what we expected. Give us ears sensitive to the voice of Your Spirit and hearts willing to obey without demanding every explanation. Keep us from forcing doors open that You have closed, and give us courage to walk through the ones You open.

Lord, we surrender our plans, our expectations, and our lives to You again. You are the One who began the good work, and we trust You to carry it to completion. Even when we cannot see what You are doing, help us remember that You are still working.

B'Shem Yeshua, In the name of Yeshua, amen.