

Ever since my college days... in times when I would feel my Christian walk has become somewhat lack-luster... and I knew that needed a spiritual kick-in-the-pants... I would often turn to a set of essays by A.W. Tozer... that I keep close to my desk. ... I would like to begin today's message by reading to you a few excerpts from his essay titled "*Following Hard After God*" – which is also... (by the way)... what I have decided to title today's sermon.

*"The whole transaction of religious conversion has been made mechanical and spiritless. Faith may now be exercised without a jar to the moral life and without embarrassment to the Ademic ego. Christ may be "received" without creating any special love for Him in the soul of the receiver. The man is "saved" but he is not hungry or thirsty after God. In fact, he is specifically taught to be satisfied and encouraged to be content with little."*

*"To have found God and still pursue Him is the soul's paradox of love."*

*"Everything is made to center upon the initial act of "accepting" Christ (a term, incidentally, which is not found in the Bible) and we are not expected thereafter to crave any further revelation of God to our souls. We have been snared in the coils of a spurious logic which insists that if we have found Him we need no more seek Him."*

*"I want deliberately to encourage this mighty longing after God. The lack of it has brought us to our present low estate. The stiff and wooden quality about our religious lives is a result of our lack of holy desire. Complacency is a deadly foe of all spiritual growth."*

As I studied our passage in Acts this week... I thought several scenes in it describes what it means to “Follow Hard After God.”

Through our study of Paul and his team of missionaries... and the others to whom they minister... we can get a glimpse of what it might look like in our own lives... if we are no longer “*snared in the coils of a spurious logic which insists that if we have found Him we need no more seek Him.*”

Let’s stop and pray... before we go any further...

### - PRAY -

Have you ever heard the expression – “*Let go and let God*”...? Those whom I have heard propose this... as the Christian way to live... seem to advise... that the Christian life should be very passive. ... Once you have found Christ... or... once you have “received” Christ... your role is to let go... and allow God to pull you through every situation... and every challenge. ... Simply sit back... and wait for God’s clear leading... before you step forward with what might be God’s leading.

That does not appear to be what Paul, Silas, and Timothy were doing in last week’s passage in the first part of Acts chapter 16... They were moving... (they set out)... and God led them as they were in motion.

### Acts 16:6-8

They pursued God... and God led them by opening and closing doors for them to go through. ... As we will continue to see in today’s passage... pursuing God involves both **HUMAN** and **DIVINE** responsibility. ... There are things that God MUST do... (We simply can’t do them)... But there are also undertakings that we are expected to perform.

I love the way that Henry Blackaby says it... and you have heard me say this many times: "*We need to discover where God is already at work... and then join Him in it.*" Following hard after God is an active pursuit of discovering where God is already at work... and joining Him in it. ... This is exactly what we see in today's passage.

### **Acts 16:9-11**

Through a series of closed doors... God brought them to a dead halt. ... They had gone as far West as they could travel. They were stopped by the Aegean Sea in front of them. Here they could go no further until God spoke to them. ... And He did... just when they needed it. "*Bring the Gospel over here to Europe...*"

There was immediate obedience to the Lord's call. Verses 10 and 11 speak for themselves - no time was lost. A straight course was set... the men moved out to do as God had led. ... They embarked on the mission to help Europe in its desperate search and need for God and His glorious salvation.

Following hard after God goes when God reveals His will. ... It doesn't sit and demand confirmation... "*OK... Lord... Make the fleece wet and the ground around it dry... Uh... Now... make the fleece dry but the ground wet...*" This example from Gideon is not a good model for us to follow.

Notice please in verse 11 that it says... "*we made a direct voyage to Samothrace...*" In the Greek... it says... "*we sailed straight for Samothrace*"... and the reason I point this out... is because saying "*we sailed straight for something*"... was a first Century sailor's expression that means "*the wind was at our backs.*"

So perfect were the winds that they sailed the 156 miles in just two days... whereas returning the other way at a later time (in Acts 20:6)... it took five days. ... They were surely conscious that God's forces of nature were propelling them forward with the message of grace. Don't you love those times in ministry... when you can say "*the wind is at our backs*"...?

The missionary team set out... and God encouragingly propelled them. Following hard after God always involves both HUMAN and DIVINE responsibility.

### **Acts 16:12**

Once they landed on the Continent of Europe... they kept moving... heading straight for Philippi. ... Why...? Macedonia had other cities. In fact they went right through Neapolis and made a beeline for Philippi.

This is where I think they were using their human reasoning. Philippi made sense for several reasons. ... In following hard after God... we are not expected to ignore our best understanding and human intellect.

First of all... Philippi was one of the most important cities in Macedonia.

About 170 years before Paul's arrival with his friends... Brutus and Cassius murdered Roman Emperor... Julius Caesar... and then quickly fled. Mark Antony and Octavian set out in hot pursuit of them and caught up to them... just outside of Philippi. The people of Philippi gave their help to Mark Antony and Octavian. Because of the help they gave... once Octavian became the next emperor... he granted Roman citizenship to the people of Philippi. (That was quite a gift!) The people had all the rights that a citizen of Rome had and they never had to pay taxes to Rome and Roman

soldiers were encouraged to retire there. ... They patterned their laws, buildings, and entertainment after Rome. Anything Rome-like... they tried to implement... including their religious beliefs. Philippi was indeed a very special city.

Being a "*chief city*" also meant it would help in spreading the Gospel. ... It had many Roman dignitaries who travelled back and forth to Rome. Plus... the most travelled Roman highway... the Ignatian Way went right through the middle of the city. Paul began his ministry in this leading city "because, if the Gospel were received there, it would the more easily spread all over the Empire. So it made logical sense to start in Philippi.

The team wasted no time in getting there... once they knew God's leading... but notice that it wasn't all charging full speed ahead... Once they arrived... there is some patience that is expressed in verse 12... ("*We remained in this city some days.*") ... So following hard after God must not mean that we must be quick in all of our actions.

Paul and his friends did not plunge immediately into evangelizing the city, even though they knew God had called them there. No doubt they needed to rest and pray and make their plans together. It is not enough to know *where* God wants us to work; we must also know *when* and *how* He wants us to work.

In following hard after God... we must act immediately on each step when He reveals what it is... and then wait until He reveals the next step. ... God leads us step by step... and He only gives us what we need to know – when we need it.

When Paul came to Macedonia under the direction of God... he was not met by any committee or given a schedule of meetings. ... Things went rather slowly at the start... but he did not quit and question God's leading. In following hard after God... we often need patience. ... Results do not always occur immediately. ... If they don't come right away... that does not show us that we understood God's leading wrong. ... The seed must be planted... then it takes time for it to grow.

### **Acts 16:13**

Just outside the city... down by the river... there was a prayer meeting.

I wonder whether that prayer meeting had anything to do with Paul coming over to Europe and the vision of the man of Macedonia! ... If so... then we find these ladies following hard after God... engaged in their human responsibility... and then God does what only He could do. He directed Paul to them through a vision. ... Following hard after God always involves both HUMAN and DIVINE responsibility.

I think that we are about to find out... that the "man of Macedonia" in Paul's vision... was actually a woman... who probably went by the name Lydia... and who was holding this prayer meeting. ... What was with this ladies prayer group... and how did Paul know to find them there...?

The missionary quartet (Paul, Silas, Timothy, and now - Luke) went to the riverside on the Sabbath instead of a synagogue because there was no synagogue in Philippi. ... According to Jewish tradition... there had to be a quorum of at least ten male heads of households before a synagogue could

be formed. ... If these requirements could not be met... the worshippers of Jehovah were to meet under the open sky near a river or sea. ... So Paul and company walked outside the city on the Sabbath... along the Gangites River... looking to see if there were any worshippers of Jehovah. ... They discovered a small group — **all women** — who met to recite the Shem-ah and pray the Shemon-eth Es-reh... and read the Law and Prophets.

Now I don't find it all that hard to imagine... that this must have been kind of a let-down to these missionaries. ... Paul was thoroughly trained as a Pharisee. His training would have included this well-ingrained saying among the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Pharisees: *"It is better that the words of the Law be burned than be delivered to a woman..."* And Paul's pharisaical prejudices would have taught him their common prayer: *"God, I thank You that I am not a Gentile, or a slave, or a woman..."*

On the face of it... a woman's prayer group would not have seemed to hold much potential for establishing the beachhead in Europe that would eventually conquer Rome and all of Europe... and the West.

So... here is something else we need to be clear on... about following hard after God: "God will often work beyond our brightest ideas and strategies." ... What we might appraise as 'low ministry potential'... is never a limit for God."

### **Acts 16:14**

I often referred to this verse when I am discussing the question about salvation that asks – "Is it all up to our human free will?" ("Do we choose God?" "Or does He chose us?") This is known as the Free will verses the Sovereignty of God issue. ... People who get wrapped up on this issue

what to know is it one ...or the other. ... But I believe that what we see here is that it is both. ... Lydia chose by her free will to listen. The word in the original Greek is “ekouen” and it means that she really perked up and paid attention. She listened and kept on giving her utmost attention the Gospel. - That is the human responsibility. But God must also do something. Without Him taking action... it doesn't matter how much Lydia would have listened.

God does the saving. ... Only God can *open the heart* of a person. ... No man can get down into the heart of another person. ... Only God can enter the heart and spiritually save people. Using our free will... we are to give our attention to the Gospel as it is proclaimed. ... God in His sovereignty opens the heart. ... Following hard after God always involves both HUMAN and DIVINE responsibility.

Once God opens the heart... He implants within us a new heart. Now this becomes true of us...

**Philippians 2:13 (ESV)**

*for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

He works on our “wanter”... so that we desire to do what His will is. ... So divine and human responsibility working in tandem continues in the Christian walk. Here is how it immediately began to work in Lydia's life.

**Acts 16:15**

Luke described with swift strokes the first two steps in Lydia's life as a disciple: (1) She was baptized, (2) she brought the rest of the members of her household to Paul and they apparently believed as well.



Then... as now... the gospel had life-changing effects. God works on our “wanter” and we start doing things that the Lord wants.

Thinking of Lydia, how would you describe the internal change of desires that have taken place in your life...? When God opened your heart... what old desires faded and what new desires came...? How has Christ's presence affected your behavior? ... Here is one that I am certain needs to be there. Having found Christ... do you want to still seek Him...? Do you desire to follow hard after God...? ... A religious conversion that is mechanical and spiritless... that has not created a special love in the soul for Christ... (that has no desire to pursue Him)... is evidence that God never has opened the heart.

... ..

With Lydia's conversion... the apostles (once again) had the wind at their backs. They were not sailing—they were hydroplaning! ... God's grace produced Christlike spirits and sacrificial giving.

But the sailing venture would not last long. ... No sooner are lost people saved... than Satan begins to hinder the work. This happens very often. But it does not mean that we've somehow been knocked off course in our following hard after God. ... In this case, he used a demonized girl who had made her masters wealthy by telling fortunes.

### **Acts 16:16-18**

Whenever we decide to follow hard after God... you can be sure Satan will earnestly fight back. The adversary is persistent. Satan will disturb us time and time again. He intends to hinder our pursuit until he can stop it.

Here in Phillipi... The evil one was working one of his old tricks. He was seeking to capture and control the events. But why not allow him to proclaim the truth of who these missionaries were...? Couldn't the missionary team capitalize on her proclamation...? (It was true what she said....)

Paul did not want either the Gospel or the name of God to be "promoted" by one of Satan's slaves... so he cast out the demon. ... Satan may speak the truth one minute and the next minute tell a lie... and the unsaved would not know the difference.

### **Acts 16:19-22**

The casting out of the demon from the girl did not stop the problems for Paul's ministry... it only increased them.

Several scholars have suggested that Philippian culture had a prejudice against Jews. That is why 10 Jewish men could not be found to reside there (the minimum number to start a synagogue.) And it is why the magistrates so quickly lost their senses and disobeyed their own laws in a rage against the visiting Jews. It sure seems to explain the meaning of verse 21... and it fits what we know about their desire to preserve their favored status and being just like Rome. (They didn't want anything to take that away from them.)

Prejudice was used to persuade since evil did not have facts.

Evil men sooner or later will accuse those who follow hard after God of being unlawful. Evil will make new laws against them... if necessary... so they can accuse God's people of being unlawful. Today, to speak out against homosexuality is considered unlawful because it is against the "hate" laws. And if you own a bakery... you better be willing to participate in weddings between homosexual partners.

The magistrates... acting with strong emotion and prejudice... not only beat them in a manner that often left the person dead... but they further humiliated them by stripping them in public. ... The magistrates did not wait for a trial but immediately punished Paul and Silas. Later the magistrates will be greatly embarrassed by this folly.

#### **Acts 16:23-24**

The evangelists' backs were reduced to a sticky... swollen... mass of lacerated skin... and dried blood. ... The jailer perhaps went a step further than necessary... brutally putting them in the stocks. They could not lie down without tearing up their backs even worse.

#### **Acts 16:25**

I cannot even begin to imagine the excruciating pain Paul and Silas were going through. ... But sitting there in the dark... smelly... rat and roach infested dungeon... they bore a strong testimony to the wonderful grace of God. They were praising – not complaining!

When you are in pain... the midnight hour is not the easiest time for a sacred concert... but God gives "songs in the night." ... "Any fool can sing in the day," said Charles Haddon Spurgeon. "It is easy to sing when we can read the notes by daylight; but the skillful singer is he who can sing when there is not a ray of light to read by.... (BUT please listen to me very carefully)... Songs in the night come only from God. Joy like this can never come in the power of men.

If you are going through a particularly tough time in your life right now... ask God to give you songs in the night. Don't try to whip up some unnatural emotion on your own. Ask God for it... then sing... sing... sing!

### **Acts 16:26-30**

Paul's attention was fixed on the jailer... the man he really wanted to win to Christ. ... It was a Roman law that if a guard lost a prisoner... he was given the same punishment the prisoner would have received... so there must have been some men in the prison who had murdered others. ... The jailer would rather commit suicide... than face shame and execution.

A hardhearted person seeking vengeance would have let the cruel jailer kill himself... but Paul was following hard after God. ... It was the jailer who was the prisoner... not Paul.

The jailer's question (what must I do to be saved?) most likely refers to being saved from the judgment of God, which he would have heard about through listening to his prisoners' prayers and songs.

Circumstances differ... but every human being experiences serious problems that cause fear... helplessness... hopelessness... and insecurity in life. In every instance of serious need... a person either chooses to follow hard after God... or to become bitter and turn away from Him. In this case the jailer chose to turn toward God... and God opened his heart. (Another example where we see human free will... and the sovereignty of God working together.)

Sometimes helplessness and hopelessness are used by God to get one who is already a believer to start following hard after God. ... *But we have to turn to God* when impossible situations confront us. The choice is up to us.

#### **Acts 16:31**

“Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved...” and then he adds... you and your household... where is where we see the jailer immediately take them... so they could believe as well.

#### **Acts 16:32**

The jailer needed to hear and believe... and so did the members of his household.

#### **Acts 16:33**

Earlier he took these men as prisoners and would not so much as clean up their backs from the bloody beating but put them in the inner prison and in stocks. Now he acts entirely differently. This is what the Gospel does to the redeemed. It makes them want to follow hard after God.

One of the evidences of a person who follows hard after God... is that he or she desires to make restitution and amends wherever we have hurt others. We should cleanse the wounds we have given to others... in our past.

### **Acts 16:34**

The jailer not only fellowshiped with Paul and Silas but he also fed them. Paul and Silas had to be hungry. They would have missed some meals because of the uproar the day before. Earlier we noted that after Lydia was saved, she opened her purse and provided room and board for the missionaries. Now after the jailer is saved, he opens his cupboards and provides food for the missionaries. ... When one follows hard after God... he (or she) will show it by giving to the cause of the Lord.

### **Acts 16:35-40**

The magistrates committed their evil in public to satisfy a mob. They were trying here to undo their folly in private. Paul puts them on the hot seat and so much as says, You condemned us in public, you must exonerate us in public, too.

The typical reader may look at Paul's action here as being proud and seeking revenge. The typical reader may think that Paul should have been glad to get out of prison and that he is only asking for more trouble by requesting the magistrates to personally release Silas and him. But Paul is not making a foolish request. There are good reasons why he made this request.

**First**, to exalt the Gospel. If the messengers of the Gospel can be discredited, then the message of the Gospel loses credibility. But if Paul and silas are publicly declared innocent, this keeps the Gospel from being dishonored.

**Second**, to ensure the church. With Paul and Silas declared innocent, it would discourage future attacks on the church in Philippi. The magistrates would take care how the church was treated lest Paul come back and take the magistrates to court for their mistreatment of him as a Roman citizen.

**Third**, to exonerate the jailer. Publicly declaring the innocence of Paul and Silas would exonerate the jailer for his benevolence to them and would keep the jailer from trouble with his superiors.

**Fourth**, to esteem the law. Declaring the innocence of Paul and Silas would manifest that the proceedings of the previous day were unlawful and wrong. The magistrates needed to be held accountable for being unlawful and giving deference to unlawful conduct.

**Fifth**, to expose the accusers. Publicly declaring the innocence of Paul and Silas would expose the accusers as being liars, troublemakers, and also scam artists. Besides the troubling of society the previous day, these men had been fleecing the citizens of Philippi with the demon-possessed woman. It always helps society to have a scam exposed so other citizens will not be defrauded and cheated by evil men.

It was then that Paul made use of his Roman citizenship and boldly challenged the officials on the legality of their treatment. This was not personal revenge but a desire to give protection and respect for the church.

It is not wrong for a person who is following hard after God... to use their status or privileges... for the cause of Christ. ... Paul used it for the sake of others.

While the record does not say that the magistrates officially and publicly apologized, it does state that they respectfully came to Paul and Silas, escorted them out of the prison, and politely asked them to leave town.

Paul and Silas remained in Philippi long enough to visit the new believers and encourage them in the Lord.

As we study the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts... we can see that following hard after God includes difficulties and challenges. Sometimes followers have problems with each other... (like Paul and Barnabas in the chapter before...) ... and sometimes the problems come from the outside. ... It is also worth noting that not every follower initiates their pursuit in exactly the same manner. ... Timothy was saved partly through the influence of a godly mother and grandmother. ... Lydia was converted through a quiet conversation with Paul at a Jewish prayer meeting... while the jailer's conversion was dramatic. One minute he was a potential suicide, and the next minute he was a child of God!

Different people with different experiences... and yet all of them changed by the grace of God... and made into those who follow hard after God.

Has your conversion experience been more mechanical and spiritless... or has God placed a new heart in you that wants to follow hard after Him...? Is there a mighty longing after God...? ... Let's (right now) go to the throne of God and talk to Him about it.