

Sermon Given by

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### Acts 16:6-15 - "Ever-increasing circles"

With some very erratic weather recently the weather forecasters have actually been pretty accurate. But there is an acknowledged scientific reason for why forecasting is such a difficult skill. It's called the Butterfly effect and it was discovered by an American forecaster, Edward Lorenz, in the 1960s.

He devised a computer programme which, once he'd typed in certain weather data, could in theory calculate what the subsequent weather pattern was going to be. One day he made a mistake – accidentally he typed into the computer a piece of data missing the last three decimal places. Instead of 0.506127, he inserted 0.506.

Luckily he discovered his mistake. It was such a minute mistake, only one part in a thousand, that he was sure it couldn't change the results much. But just to be thorough he decided to go back and run the programme with the full figure in place. Imagine his amazement when the revised weather pattern came out completely different from the earlier graph. He couldn't believe his eyes. It was as if, as he put it later, a tiny atmospheric disturbance in China, no greater than the beat of a butterfly's wing, should a week or so later give rise to a force 12 hurricane the other side of the world in New York.

Hence the name of his discovery: The Butterfly Effect. Hence the problems faced by forecasters – the satellite pictures don't quite pick up all those butterflies in China!

That principle, where some tiny, apparently insignificant fact causes a momentous effect out of all proportion to its original size, happens in other situations too, not just with the weather.

Do you know this children's ditty? For want of a nail, the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe, the horse was lost; for want of a horse, the rider was lost; for want of a rider the battle was lost; for want of a battle the kingdom was lost. One single nail can be the difference between victory and defeat for an entire nation. And what goes for single nails can sometimes go for single lives as well.

Listen to this piece called one solitary life...

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in still another village, living in a carpenter's shop till he was thirty. Then for three years he was a travelling preacher.

He never wrote a book. He never held public office. He never had a family or owned a house. He didn't go to college. He never visited a big city. He never travelled more than two hundred miles from the place he was born. He did none of the things one usually associates with greatness.

He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves.

While he was dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing, the only property he had on earth. When he was dead he was laid in a borrowed grave.

Twenty centuries have come and gone and today he is the central figure of the human race. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings and queens that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of human beings on this earth as much as that **one solitary life**.

That's the butterfly effect, you see, working this time not in the weather, but throughout history. Because the ripples of that one solitary life didn't die away at Jesus' death.

In fact the ripples have become great tidal waves, spreading and expanding till they take in the whole wide world. And the book of Acts, which we are studying at the moment, maps the early stages of that process as the ever-increasing circles of Jesus' influence begin to spread.

So in coming weeks we'll see Jesus planting his flag in four places: Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea and Athens. By the end of the book there is a church in the hub of the known world, Rome. Who would have believed it? The apparently insignificant peasant preacher Jesus, leading a campaign, achieving a massive conquest with a power and following that no Roman emperor ever had...

That is the story of the book of Acts. In his gospel, Luke just told us what Jesus 'began to do and to teach'. But in Acts, Luke is telling us that the earthly life and death of Jesus wasn't the end of the story – it was just the beginning and from that one solitary life, the earth-shattering effects are still being felt today.

Today's section in Acts 16 presents us with a fascinating episode in the advance of Jesus Christ through his world, as we go back to the city of Philippi and Paul's visit there, in around AD 49, under 20 years after Jesus' death.

Philippi is in modern day Macedonia, just to the north of Greece. So this is the time when the Gospel broke through for the first time into Europe – which represents a significant stage in the advance of the good news. Once Jesus' flag was planted in Europe, the closest you could ever get to being a Christian continent, the gospel was to spread throughout the world.

You can capture some sense of the importance of this new stage in the evangelisation of the world in verses 6-10 of the chapter. The end of the previous chapter sees Paul in Syria and Turkey, strengthening churches which were founded on his first missionary journey. Then in Chapter 16 you get the impression of a man running his head into a stone wall, wherever he turns.

Listen to verses 6-8 <sup>6</sup> ***Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. <sup>7</sup> When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. <sup>8</sup> So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.***

We're not told how the Holy Spirit stopped them heading into Asia or Bithynia, so we shouldn't speculate too much. It might have been a word from God, or it could have been a feeling of unease... or an impassable river... or a military road-block – who knows. But imagine the frustration – they're keen to tell others about Jesus and they can't. No one needs a special word to do that: all believers

are under orders to spread the message about Jesus. But wherever Paul and his men turn – North, South, East – the door slams shut. Their way is blocked by a repeated ‘No’ from heaven.

Actually it has often been that way in the spread of the gospel. William Carey the great Baptist Missionary wanted to go to see the South Sea Islands (Polynesia) and ended up instead all his life in India. Adoniram Judson wanted to go to India and ended up in Burma. And even though it isn’t on the same scale as those two greats it was only after a number of roadblocks that Tim Chapman ended up leading the people of Christ Church South Cambs to Sawston. I wonder if you have learned the positive value of negative guidance in your life – the frustrations and the roadblocks are actually God’s way of getting you where he wants you to be.

That’s what happened here. North, South, East the door slams shut. At last they head West, to the westernmost tip of Turkey and God’s plan becomes clear. Verse 9: ***During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”***

So without hesitation they head off across the sea to Philippi – a major Roman base across the Aegean Sea. Let me read verses 10-12

***<sup>10</sup> After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.***

***<sup>11</sup> From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. <sup>12</sup> From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.***

Obviously there was no line for them to cross, so that they knew the Christian message was going from Asia to Europe – but that was the momentous advance that was being made.

Before we move on, it is important for us to acknowledge **how** momentous a step that was. We aren’t necessarily supposed to see all the details of these stories as patterns for us as we spread the gospel today.

You see, sometimes people read the book of Acts in the flat and say, ‘it happened this way to them, so it ought to be happening to us in the same way. Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia saying: “Come over and help us.” (In other words, give us the most important help it is possible to give anyone – give us the gospel). So I expect God to give me similar visions as to how and where I preach the Gospel’.

Or a lack of such a vision is taken as divine permission **not** to preach the gospel: ‘I’m not going to talk about Jesus to anyone unless God lays on that sort of call for me. It would be quiet wrong of me to do so without a vision’.

It’s what I have called example theology before – and it is frequently an unhelpful way of reading the book of Acts. Yes – God did speak to Paul in this dramatic, unmistakably supernatural way. Yes – he has done so in the lives of some Christians since then; I think we have to say that. And yes – he could do the same again today. Of course he can; he is Sovereign.

Nonetheless this kind of guidance was the exception not the rule, even for the apostle Paul. And such supernatural guidance is not to be considered normative for Christians today.

Or rather God's guidance is normative: in the sense that his guiding hand is always at work in our lives. Whether we know it or not, he is guiding us. When Christians look back on their lives they can often tell that.

And sometimes, very occasionally he will show people unmistakably in advance what his plan is. It doesn't happen very often, but when it does happen it's a reminder that he is guiding our lives all the time, unseen, even when the guidance doesn't come in advance.

On this occasion that's what happened and it's very appropriate when you consider that this was a dramatic new departure, a major step forward in Jesus' advance through the world, as the Gospel broke new ground, into Europe and from there throughout the world.

Well, let's move on and see what happened once that boundary line had been crossed in verses 13 to 15:

***<sup>13</sup> On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup>***

***One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. <sup>15</sup> When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.***

Were looking there at the first convert in Europe – not perhaps the first person we would have selected as a bridgehead. Her name was Lydia – obviously she was a woman, although to choose a woman first would not have been an obvious thing in the 1<sup>st</sup> century world. She was a professional too – a cloth dealer in the rag-trade although for her to be a dealer in purple cloth tells you she was an upmarket dealer.

What's notable here is the quiet beginning to the work in Philippi. We will see next week that this is the calm before the storm. But it all began down by the river with a group of God-fearing women. And when you consider the lengths to which God had gone to get Paul there, this is pretty disappointing perhaps.

When they get to Philippi unlike so often, there was apparently no synagogue for Paul initially to base his work in. that means there were fewer than 10 adult Jewish males in the location.

When there weren't enough people in a locality to form a synagogue, it was still the custom for Jewish people to meet on the Sabbath in the towns wherever they were scattered across the Eastern Mediterranean. And the regular meeting if you didn't have a synagogue was often for a time of prayer outside the town by a river. Hence that Psalm from the time of the exile, Psalm 137: ***'by the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion'***.

That's the situation here – a gathering of Jews and God-fearers too small for a synagogue. But there's no hint that Paul was disappointed by these small beginnings. He doesn't query God's guidance: 'why ever did you bring me here, God?'

Even if with the vision Paul and Silas had been expecting more than this on their arrival in Macedonia, they just did what they could with what was in front of them, with the opportunities that presented themselves. They just took the next step ahead of them. And God worked.

Did you notice how Luke leaves no doubt that it was a supernatural work by Jesus and not Paul's clever speech that converted Lydia? Look at the end of verse 14: ***'The Lord opened her heart to respond to the message.'***

It's a beautiful description, but it's not the way we often speak today. People talk as if the door handle to our hearts were on the inside. They talk about us opening our hearts. It's not wrong to do that – that's how it feels at the time. But when Luke talks about Lydia, he doesn't say she opened her heart to respond to the Gospel. The Lord opened her heart. That's the right way around. The handle really is on the outside and the Lord opens it.

You see our hearts are locked tight against the Gospel normally. It's not just that we ***don't want*** to open our hearts to Christ; we ***could not***, even if we wanted to. It is Christ who conquers Lydia's heart.

But there is nothing brutal or cruel about Jesus' conquest, as if he over-rides her personality. This is how C.H. Spurgeon put it: 'when you see a chest wrenched open, the hinges torn off, the clasp destroyed, then you discern at once the hand of a thief. But when you observe a chest deftly and smoothly opened, with a master key, you discern the hand of the owner.'

So – Jesus opens hearts not like a beast tearing open his prey, cruelly overpowering them, but like an owner opening his treasure. And a mark of his victory in Lydia's case was that he opened not just her heart to Paul's message; he opened her home to the messengers as well... a sure proof that she really had received Christ.

So that was the first Christian convert in Europe. We'll see next week that a lot more happened in Philippi... But there are lessons for us in what we read here.

If it's Jesus Christ's work to open people's hearts, then once again we are seeing the butterfly effect lived out here. One small disturbance in Palestine all those years ago with ongoing effects far afield, much later. And still that goes on today.

My father in law is a clergyman in a large church with over 2000 attending each week just outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He's still going strong at the age of 75, but he officially retires this week.

He's been a great encouragement to me in my work in a much smaller church for one simple reason. He always stresses the same thing to me. His great lesson to me is this: it doesn't matter how big or small a church is, God's kingdom always grows the same way: **one by one by one**... This is from someone who for forty years has regularly preached to four figure audiences!

Isn't that the lesson of Lydia's conversion? Paul arrives in Philippi the leading city of the region. Perhaps he harbours big hopes for a really significant work. And what happens?

Initially it is a small beginning; one woman comes to faith – or rather, because it is his work, not ours, God brings one woman to faith. But that is a sign that the butterfly effect is operating – Jesus is still at work reaching people, **one by one by one**.

If you are Christian don't despair of any of your friends. You are not where you are by accident. You are there because God has placed you there and he can reach the people he wants to reach through you, one by one by one.

This is why it's a good thing to lend a Christian book to a family member, even if we feel other family members' eyes boring into us as we do so. This is why we send a Christmas card and write an appropriate Bible verse in it to an old friend we haven't seen for a while, but whom we have recently heard news about and had on our hearts. Or why we invite that colleague at work who is being driven to distraction by the impossible demands of their aged parents out for a drink and a chat during lunch.

It's why we pray on for God to do this work of his in their lives; why we join with other Christians in prayer meetings or prayer triplets to ask him to do it: it's his work, not ours and it's his speciality... So don't despair... Because Jesus is committed to opening peoples' hearts to receive the message of the good news.

And if you aren't yet a Christian, please, don't despair of yourself. You are not here by accident. If you are listening to God's word, tonight and in the future, that will be the way the Lord Jesus opens your heart and your life to his amazing message.

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)