

Through a Glass, Dimly

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Congratulations! You are finally here! Your diplomas await you, and you can hardly wait for them. I am certain that for each of you there have been difficult times along the road that finally brought you to this place and this time. I am also certain that there have been times of smooth sailing, when everything simply seemed to fall into place. And I hope there have been also exhilarating times of discovery, high points that you will never forget, and you will long celebrate. Certainly, no matter which of these various experiences has prevailed in your years here, you are now at a point of transition, at an end that is also a beginning.

It is with all this in mind that I call your attention to the Scripture passage that has been read. It refers to an event that took place during what is often called “Paul’s second missionary journey.” Up to this point, the book of Acts has told us very little of this second journey. In fact, in just seven verses practically the entire first journey is repeated, except that this time instead of going to Asia Minor by way of Cyprus, Paul and Silas go by way of Syria and Cilicia, that is, by land. They seem to visit the same cities that Paul had already visited, although the text mentions only three: Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium. This does not mean, however, that this was a quick trip. On the contrary, we are told that Paul and Silas—and then also Timothy—went “from town to town,” and that the churches “were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.”

¹. A briefer version of this sermon was preached at the Seminary of the Southwest three days earlier.

Now, at the point where our text picks up the story, Paul and his companions are at what is clearly a final point in their journey. The last legs of that journey must have been frustrating for we are told, with no further explanation, that the Spirit would not allow them to speak the word in Asia. Then they considered going east into the province of Bithynia, but this too the Spirit would not allow. (I wish I could tell you exactly what this means, or how the Spirit hindered them, but the fact is that nobody knows.) So, having completed their mission and having visited the churches that Paul had founded in his earlier voyage, Paul and his companions are at Troas, on the Aegean and the very end of Asia, and it seems to be time to return home to Antioch and report on their work.

But then comes the famous vision of the Macedonian man who pleads with Paul, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”

There is one item in that vision that intrigues me. In Greek, it is not necessary to say “a Macedonian *man*,” or “a *man* from Macedonia.” It would simply suffice to say, “a Macedonian,” a word whose masculine form would be sufficient. One does not say “a Macedonian *man*” unless one really means exactly that, a man, an *aner*, a male member of the human species. The addition of the word *aner*, “man,” in the Greek emphasizes his gender in a way similar to the English “a Macedonian *male*.”

So, on the basis of this vision of the Macedonian *male*, Paul and his companions take a ship and cross the Aegean into Europe, landing first in Samothrace and eventually making their way to Philippi. There, when the Sabbath comes, Paul attempts to follow his usual procedure when arriving at a new city: to go to the synagogue and there to preach the message of Jesus Christ. They go outside the city gate to a place by the river, where they expect to find a synagogue.

But what they find is not a synagogue. A synagogue requires the presence of at least ten *men*. What they find is a group of *women* who have gathered there. The text does not even say that they had gathered to pray, although if you wish we may surmise that.

Now think about that. Paul has come to Macedonia on the basis of a vision of a Macedonian *man*. He goes looking for a synagogue where there should be at least ten men. And what he finds is not ten men nor even one Macedonian man, but a group of women! And the only one among them whom Acts mentions by name is not even a Macedonian, but a merchant from Thyatira in Asia Minor, practically next door to Troas, where Paul had just come from!

I can well imagine Paul looking around and asking himself, where is that man whom I saw? Why did he call me here where there is not even a synagogue? Was it really a vision inspired by God? What am I to do here with these women by the river?

At least the answer to this last question is simple. Later Paul would write, “woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!” So, seeing that there is no synagogue, Paul and his companions sit down and speak to the women there.

One of them is Lydia of Thyatira, a dealer in the very luxurious purple cloth. Acts tells us that she was “a worshiper of God.” The fact that she is not called a Jew, or a daughter of Abraham may be an indication that she was what the Jews called a “god-fearer,” that is, a person who believed in the God of Israel and followed the moral laws of Israel, but for whatever reason did not become a proselyte and thus a Jew. Such were, for instance, the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius the centurion.

At any rate, the result of their speaking the gospel is astonishing. Lydia is converted. She and her entire household are baptized. She is a forceful woman who according to Acts “prevailed” on Paul and his companions, forcing them to stay at her home—which was contrary to Paul’s usual practice. And Lydia becomes the beginning of the best and most supportive of all of the churches founded by Paul.

But back to the vision of the Macedonian *man*, I ask myself, why would God send Paul a vision of a *man*, if what he would meet would be a group of *women*? Much of what is said about Paul’s misogyny is false or at least exaggerated. But even if just some of it is true, I can imagine what

Paul would have thought if the vision had been of a Macedonian woman: “Is this really from God? How can I help this woman? Have I simply had an erotic dream?”

And if the vision had been of Lydia herself, Paul could also ask, “Why should I cross the sea and go to Macedonia to help someone from Thyatira which is just a few miles southeast from here?”

Paul’s vision does not tell him all that the future holds. His vision tells him what he needs to know in order to move in the right direction. If his vision had been absolutely clear, he might well have balked at it.

Something similar happens a bit earlier, in Acts 10, where Peter is given a rather perplexing and confusing vision. He does not like the vision which tells him to kill and eat unclean animals he has never eaten. Three times he is told to do it and three times he refuses. He still has no idea what it all means when he is told to go to Caesarea, but no more. Why is it that Peter’s vision is so confusing, and the instructions given him so limited? Apparently because if he had been told that he was to go to Caesarea and baptize a bunch of Gentiles—and a Roman centurion at that!—he would have balked.

Neither Paul in Troas nor Peter in Joppa receive a clear vision of what the future holds. Their vision tells them what they need to know in order to do what God wants them to do.

And now we are here. This graduation and all the decisions and expectations surrounding it, may well make us feel like Paul at Troas. We may have been exploring various avenues of service, various career options, and have found the doors closed, like Paul in his desire to go to Bithynia. We may have visions of serving as pastors of a church, or of practicing pastoral care and counseling, or of expanding our ministry in new directions. We all have visions of applying what we have learned in new and exciting ways . . .

And yet, two things are certain: First, not one of our visions will turn out exactly as we expect, nor exactly as we wish. Our Macedonian men will become women from Thyatira. No matter how well we prepare, no matter how well we plan, the future will surprise us.

And, secondly, it is also certain that the real future—not the one we dream, but the one God plans—will be better than all our plans and richer than all our dreams. The Macedonian man will become Lydia of Thyatira. The church unexpectedly founded by the river, where an unexpected audience was found, may well become the crown of all our achievements.

The vision need not be clear. I would even dare say, the vision *will not* be clear. But beyond the dimness of the vision, beyond your perplexity, exhilaration, doubts and dreams as you receive these credentials of your study, out there somewhere in the future, the God who called Paul to Macedonia and Peter to Caesarea is calling you to meet Lydia, to meet Cornelius, to meet God! So be it! Amen