

# Lydia

ACTS 16:11-15

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This morning, as we begin our series of lessons on great women in the Bible, I would invite you to turn with me to Acts 16, to what is actually one of the greatest events in world history. In fact, what happens here might not seem to be very important when we read it for the first time, but it is the inspired record of the gospel moving from Asia into Europe for the very first time, an event that changes the course of western civilization. I am referring, of course, to the baptism of Lydia in the Roman colony of Philippi. In our pew Bibles, Acts 16 is found on page 1731, and if we look back at the previous page, we notice a section heading toward the end of Chapter 15, and the heading indicates the beginning of Paul's Second Missionary Journey. Paul and Barnabas have their rather famous disagreement and split up, so Paul takes Silas, and the two of them head out on their own. Their goal is to go back and strengthen the churches that Paul had established on his First Missionary Journey. And as you can see on the map up here, that is what they do. They go back to Derbe and Lystra (where Paul had been beaten and left for dead on the first journey). At this point they pick up Timothy, a young convert to the Christian faith. Starting in verse 6, these three men want to reach out to several of the surrounding Roman provinces, but the text tells us that the Holy Spirit prevented them – they were not allowed. I like how the map up here says, "No!" So as they are wondering where to go next, Paul has a vision in the night, and in that vision he sees a man from Macedonia.

Macedonia, of course, is northern Greece, and this man was saying, ***"Come over to Macedonia and help us!"*** I hope all of us were paying attention to the song we sang right before the lesson a few moments ago, "We have heard the Macedonian call today! Send the light! Send the light!" When I was a kid, I remember my mom telling me how she grew up down south and she always thought that song was referring to "cinder light," as in the light from the glowing coals of a campfire, "cinder light." But that is not it! "Send the light!" The song, then, is about Paul hearing the "Macedonian call," as God was telling him not to turn aside to the right or to the left but to press forward into Europe. And that is exactly what Paul did. Starting in verse 11, Paul and his companions make a beeline for the Macedonian city of Philippi.

From secular history, we know that Philippi was a Roman colony, and it was strategically located along the Egnatian Way, a Roman road connecting Rome itself by boat and land to Asia. The Egnatian Way or "Via Egnatia" was a road cutting across northern Greece, and as you can see, Philippi was almost exactly in the middle of that road. The Roman Empire, needed this road to work. They needed this road to stay open. So what the Empire did was to make Philippi a colony. It was its own federal province, similar to our own District

of Columbia. The city answered to the Emperor, and the city basically became a “little Rome.” And to stabilize the area, the Roman Empire would send many of its soldiers there to retire. Basically, the military said, “When you are done with your military service, if you move to Philippi, you will be exempt from all taxes for the rest of your life!” Retired soldiers would move there, and as you can imagine, their presence brought a sense of stability to the area. And from Rome’s point of view, they accomplished this without really spending a lot of money. It was crucial for this road to stay open, and it was very important that law and order be maintained along this route. By the way, this road that was so important to Rome was also important to the early church. The Romans referred to Philippi as the “gateway to the east.” To the Lord’s church, Philippi was the “gateway to the west.”

I mentioned that Paul is accompanied by Silas and Timothy. There is another man who joins up at this point, though. How do we know this? Up through verse 9, the author of this account refers to how **“they”** went on this trip. **“They”** did this, and **“they”** did that. Notice, though, the change in verse 10, **“When [Paul] had seen the vision, immediately WE sought to go into Macedonia....”** Who is **“we”**? **“We”** would include the author of the book of Acts. So at this point, we know that Luke (a medical doctor) joins up with the team. So we have Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke on this trip. It is interesting to me to see how this mission trip has evolved. It starts out as a way to check in with those churches Paul had established previously in southeast Asia Minor, and it morphs into Paul and this missionary dream-team taking the gospel into Europe for the very first time, changing the course of human history.

If you will, please look with me at what happens next – Acts 16:11-15,

***<sup>11</sup> So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; <sup>12</sup> and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. <sup>13</sup> And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. <sup>14</sup> A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. <sup>15</sup> And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us.***

As we study this request from one of the women of the congregation here, I would like to make four observations concerning the life of Lydia and what we know about her from this passage.

I. **And one of the first things we learn about Lydia is that SHE IS A WOMAN OF WORSHIP AND PRAYER – SHE IS DEVOUT, SHE IS RELIGIOUS.**

One thing I love about this passage is that as Paul and his companions arrive in Philippi, instead of meeting the man from the vision, they meet a woman instead! Never underestimate the power of a praying woman! They meet this woman on the Sabbath Day, outside the city gate, by the river, where a group of women had assembled for prayer. The picture on the wall up here is a picture of the river that runs through the city of Philippi.

We are not told whether Lydia is a Jew or a Gentile, but we are told in verse 14 that she is a **“worshiper of God,”** a phrase in the ancient Jewish world that often referred to a Gentile convert to Judaism – similar to the

Ethiopian Eunuch we studied two weeks ago (in Acts 8). Apparently, though, there was no synagogue in Philippi. Jewish tradition said that it took at least ten Jewish men to establish a synagogue. But here, we have only women, and they were meeting by the river on the Sabbath Day, for the purpose of prayer. Apparently, this custom goes back to the Babylonian Captivity. We've been studying this in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In Babylon, the Jewish people were taken away from the temple, and this custom of meeting by the river is actually referred to in Psalm 137:1, where this song of mourning says, ***"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion."*** Starting in Babylon, then, the custom was: If there is no place to worship and pray, go down to the river! We have a song about this we sometimes sing today, "Shall We Gather at the River?" The song takes this concept of meeting by the river and applies it to heaven – there is a day coming when all of us will meet by the river of life in heaven to worship God for eternity. There is a longstanding tradition among God's people, then, that if there is no place to worship, you meet at the river, and this is exactly what Lydia is doing.

One question that comes to my mind is: What are these women praying for? We are not told, and yet it is interesting to me that as they are praying, perhaps almost as an answer to their prayers, four gospel preachers show up, ready to teach them about the Lord Jesus Christ! They had no idea that as they prayed in previous weeks, Paul and his companions were in the process of getting shut down and directed to this very riverside, but that is exactly what happens.

What I also find interesting is that Lydia is not even a permanent resident of Philippi! In fact, Lydia is originally from one of those places where Paul was forbidden from traveling earlier! Remember those "NO's" on the map? Lydia was from one of those "No's"! Lydia is from Thyatira, one of the Seven Churches of Asia mentioned later in the book of Revelation. Many have suggested, by the way, that Lydia was named for the Roman Province where she was born – Thyatira is in the Roman Province of Lydia. The point is: Lydia is a woman of prayer, and as she prays, Paul and his team show up to speak of Jesus.

## II. **There is a second observation we can make about Lydia in this passage, and that is: SHE IS A SELLER OF PURPLE FABRIC, SHE IS AN ENTREPRENEUR.**

And what I love about this aspect of her life is this: She is not identified through her husband! This is not, "Lydia, Bob's wife," but this is ***"Lydia, a seller of purple fabric."*** There is no mention of a husband here. She might have been married, but we don't know. Some have suggested that she was a widow. But again, we don't know. We do have a reference to her ***"household"*** (in verse 15), but the word Luke uses here was also used in the ancient world to refer to a person's work associates.

In the request that led to this morning's lesson, in that section under why this woman is especially important or inspiring to you, one of the women of this congregation said that she is inspired by Lydia, because "she was a wealthy business woman; but, she put God first and was still successful." There are a number of lessons we can learn from this. First of all, it is not wrong at all for a woman to take a leadership role in the business world. How do we know she was successful? We'll get to this in just a moment, but by the time we get to the end of this chapter, it seems that the church in Philippi is meeting in her house. She seems to have a house large enough, then, to accommodate this growing congregation. Several years ago, we asked our daughter what she would like to do when she grows up, and her answer was, "I want to sit at the head of a table in large building!" And the idea there was, "I want to be a CEO! I want to lead a large company!" Scripturally, there is no problem with that! Go get it! Years ago, it hit me that all of my supervisors in my secular work before preaching have been women – the owner of a Christmas tree farm down in Illinois, the editor of the Crystal

Lake newspaper where I worked as a photographer, and the head of the Public Relations office down at Freed-Hardeman. In terms of success in the business world, Lydia is an example.

When we go back and study ancient history, we find that Lydia's hometown of Thyatira was well known for its production of purple fabric, and apparently, Lydia took advantage of this as some kind of an exporter. Archaeologists tell us that the purple dye was made by squeezing a tiny gland in one particular species of shellfish (the shell is pictured on the wall up here), and each one of these critters gives only one or two drops of dye. The dye is then processed for several days and is boiled down to roughly 6% of its original volume. It would take literally tens of thousands of these snail-like creatures to produce enough dye to color a single garment. One ancient document explains that the dye was worth twice its weight in gold. I think of our ink-jet cartridges today. That ink is the most expensive thing I own, I usually keep several in reserve, and so if somebody breaks into my house this morning, they can take anything, but I really hope they leave the inkjet cartridges! But that's the way it was with the dye from this mollusk. It was originally discovered when some guy's dog chewed up one of these on the seashore (removing the mollusk from the shell), and it turned the dog's mouth purple. Well, it just exploded from there, even to the point where these shellfish got near the point of extinction. We understand, then, why purple is a color reserved for royalty and for those who were incredibly wealthy. We remember how the soldiers put a purple robe on Jesus before his crucifixion, mocking him as the *"king of the Jews."* We remember the account of the Rich Man and Lazarus and how the rich man *"habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day"* (Luke 16:19).

Lydia, then, was a dealer of this purple fabric. But what I find interesting here, and what has inspired at least one of our women here in Madison, is that her success in business did not keep her from going down to the river to worship and pray to God on the Sabbath! And remember: She is hundreds of miles away from home at this point! I know I am so encouraged when I hear of our members traveling on business who are able to connect with God's people on those trips. I have a friend (a member of the church down in Janesville) who is a truck driver, and he regularly calls me on Sunday morning, sometimes before 7 in the morning, and he'll say, "Baxter, I'm in such and such town in Indiana, and I need your help finding a church!" I'll look it up in our nationwide directory of churches in the back room back there, I'll pull it up online, I'll get him a number for the preacher or one of the elders, and sometimes I'll even pull up a satellite photo of the church building so he can figure out if he can get his semi in there or if he needs a ride from a truck stop. He travels, but like Lydia, he makes a point of connecting with God's people on the road. The Internet is often the modern equivalent of going down by the river to find our Christian family in those far off places. But we are thankful for Lydia's example here. Her business success, her secular pursuits, did not keep her from putting God first in her life. She was a woman of prayer, and she was also successful in the business world.

III. **As we go back to our text in Acts 16, there is a third observation I would make, and that is: ONCE LYDIA HEARD THE GOOD NEWS, SHE OBEYED IT BY ALLOWING HERSELF TO BE BAPTIZED INTO JESUS CHRIST FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF HER SINS. Again, up here we have another picture of the river in Philippi.**

We do not have many details here, but notice the order of things: In verse 13, Paul and his companions sit down and begin speaking to the women who had assembled, in verse 14, we find that Lydia is listening, the Lord opens her heart as she listens, and she responds to Paul's message by being baptized. That right there is very simple, and in many ways it follows the pattern we studied two weeks ago with the Ethiopian Eunuch – he was reading the word of God, Phillip preached Jesus to him, and the Eunuch responded to the message by pulling the chariot over to the side of the road and being baptized. It follows the pattern in Acts 2 where Peter preached the word of God and the people responded by turning away from their sins before being baptized

for the forgiveness of those sins. The pattern is similar to what happened to Paul himself: He prayed for three days, at which time he was told by Ananias, ***“What are you waiting for? Get up, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord”*** (Acts 22:16). In the same way, when Lydia hears the word of God, she obeys it.

IV. Before we close, I would point out one more lesson we can learn from this woman’s life, and that is: **ONCE SHE OBEYED THE GOSPEL, SHE USED HER RESOURCES TO BUILD UP AND STRENGTHEN GOD’S KINGDOM.**

Specifically, she opens her home to the apostle Paul. Notice verse 15 again, ***“And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.’ And she prevailed upon us.”*** First of all, this is a rather generous offer. This isn’t just Paul, but this is Paul and three other men. Most of us can imagine that having four grown men stay with us for an unspecified length of time might be a little uncomfortable. It certainly has the potential to be somewhat expensive – extra food, extra laundry, and so on. Secondly, though, I believe we learn something about Lydia as we look at exactly how this went down. In verse 15, ***“she urged us saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful...”*** And the result is, ***“she prevailed upon us.”*** Literally, “she put pressure on both sides.” Or (also literally), “she put the squeeze on us.” Have you ever been “squeezed” like this? I think of the somewhat uncomfortable back and forth when two friends are arguing over who gets the check at a restaurant. And I don’t mean who “has” to pay, but who “gets” to pay! We know that Paul himself was rather stubborn. And so I can imagine how this goes down, “Come on, Paul, stay at my house!” “No, we can’t do that.” “Yes, please stay.” “No, really, it’s okay.” “What, am I not faithful enough for you to stay here?” “No, that’s not it.” And eventually, “Okay, fine, you win! We will stay here!” Lydia, this newly converted businesswoman, used her negotiating skills to out-negotiate the apostle Paul. She ***“prevailed.”*** Literally, she “out-squeezed” the apostle Paul! She got him in a position where he could not refuse the offer! She didn’t say, “Well, let me know if you need anything.” She didn’t say, “We’ll have you over as soon as we get the house cleaned up.” She didn’t say, “Let me know if I can help.” But she insisted that these men stay in her home, and she prevailed.

But this is not the end of it. In the next few verses, Paul and Silas will get in trouble for casting an evil spirit out of a slave girl, they then get thrown in prison, the jailer in Philippi is converted, and then we get down to verse 40. Notice, please, Acts 16:40, ***“They went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.”*** It seems to me, then, that the church in Philippi was meeting in Lydia’s house. They did not go back to the riverside, but they went to the home of this Christian woman.

I find it interesting that as we read on through the New Testament, that the church in Philippi becomes one of the greatest and most generous congregations in the First Century. They will go on to support Paul financially on his remaining missionary journeys, and they will also support him as he was in prison for the preaching of the gospel. As the very first convert, we have to believe that Lydia was at least partially responsible for the attitude of the church there in Philippi.

I would also point out that of all the letters ever written by the apostle Paul, the letter he will go on to write to the church in Philippi is by far the warmest and most intimate. That passage Drew read for us earlier came from the book of Philippians, ***“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you.”*** I believe that Paul’s warm attitude toward the church in Philippi goes back to the first few members of that congregation, and Lydia’s hospitality was a key part of it. Today, we can learn from this woman’s example. We learn the importance of using our talents and skills, our financial resources, and even our homes for the benefit of God’s kingdom.

**Conclusion:**

There may be someone here this morning or listening or reading online (either a man or a woman) who may be in a very similar situation as that of Lydia. Maybe you've been looking for the truth, perhaps you have been praying – asking God that you might have a chance to find the truth. The truth is: We are lost in sin, God sent his Son Jesus as a perfect sacrifice, and we accept his sacrifice through our obedience to the message; that is, we believe in Jesus, we turn away from sin, and we allow ourselves to be briefly buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins. At that point, we are born into God's family and the Christian life begins.

Lydia probably had no idea when she left home to go to the river that day, that she would go home later that evening as a Christian. She had no idea that her own life and the lives of everyone in her household would be changed forever. It is possible that today will be that kind of day for you and your family. If you know that you are lost in sin, if you are ready to obey God (being immersed into the body of his Son Jesus), you can let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)