

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (10-10-1999 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Acts 16:9-15

Additional Bible Reading: Philippians 1:1-8
The conversion of Lydia

Introduction

Some events in history prove to be important turning points. Things are never the same again. This is true, among many other things, of sea voyages, c.f. the persecution by James I of godly men, led to the voyage of the Pilgrim Fathers on the Mayflower in 1620. From this came the important American colonies on the other side of the Atlantic, ultimately leading to the USA in 1776.

But that voyage was not half so serious and important as one taken in 52AD by four men – Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke. They travelled from Troas to the mountainous island of Samothracia, and from there to Neapolis. Then they journeyed 10 miles inland to Philippi. The Gospel had arrived in Europe. So far it had been confined to Asia (though the Ethiopian Eunuch would have taken it to one country in Africa). Following this voyage, the Gospel reached Europe, and from there it would spread far and wide.

Paul began his work in Philippi. It was an important city, a Roman colony, where veterans of the Roman army settled. It was like living in Rome itself, for they wore Roman clothing, spoke Latin, obeyed Roman laws, and were exempt from taxation. It was near an important crossroads, and had a famous school of medicine.

Luke records three conversions – one by the riverside, one by the roadside, and one by the fireside. Very different people were involved, but the needs of each were met in Christ. That is the wonderful thing about the Gospel – the basic spiritual needs of every man are met in Christ. Though outwardly different, and though the Gospel comes to us in different ways, and though our experience of God's power is different, each has an individual testimony, but the Gospel takes each one as he is, and we all reach the same end – Christ. Here is salvation, forgiveness, new relationship with God, new divine life, new end, new management and authority. Our background, education, age or job does not matter. The only thing that matters is that we belong to Christ, are saved by Him and under His authority.

Wealthy business woman – Lydia

On Paul's arrival at Philippi he enquired about the Jewish synagogue, because he came to speak to the Jews first. The absence of a Jewish synagogue indicates that there were not 10 Jewish males to form one. There may have been many women, but they did not count. In the absence of a synagogue, the Jews would meet for prayer in the open air and near the river or the sea. So Paul and his party went to the riverside, one mile NE of the city, and met the women praying there.

Paul sat down and spoke to the women there about the Lord. This was the first sermon preached in Europe, and it was in conversational style, at a prayer meeting. There

were only a few women present, hardly a promising start – but big oaks come from little acorns, as here.

Lydia was the leader. She was a businesswoman, a seller of purple from Thyatira. The purple dye came from shellfish, and was very costly. Purple was a favourite colour with the Romans. Purple trimming around the white toga was desirable. It was the colour often worn by prominent ladies, and used in rugs and tapestries. The rich, the state officials and Emperors loved purple. Lydia was a successful businesswoman, and had a large enough house to accommodate the missionary team. It was in her home that the new church was formed (Acts 16:40). She was capable, successful, well off, with servants.

She was also a seeker. Evidently she was proselyte, a convert from paganism, attracted by the Jewish moral standards and the holy character of the Jewish God. She kept her new religion faithfully, observing the Sabbath and using it for prayer. No doubt she read the Old Testament Scriptures. What a fine sort of person – successful, well to do, capable, good character, God-fearing, sincere – but something was missing. She had some light, but more light was needed. She was not satisfied spiritually.

There are others like her in Acts, e.g. Cornelius, and the Ethiopian Eunuch. They too were people to be respected, upright, sincere, genuine, good at their job, but with something missing, not quite complete. We all have people like this in our families and colleagues like this at work. Admirable people, but without Christ and all He can be and do for them. They have not found that secret of life – that can only be found in Christ, not in morality or religion.

*“O Christ, in Thee my soul has found
And found in Thee alone
The peace, the joy I sought so long,
The bliss till now unknown.”*

Only Christ can say, **He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty** (John 6:35). **He satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things** (Psalm 107:9). Fullness of life, peace of heart, assurance and spiritual satisfaction come only when we can say, **For me to live is Christ** (Philippians 1:21).

Two means God used

However diverse may be testimonies to conversion, God always works with two instruments – His Word and His Spirit. These two are always present. With Lydia, **The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message** (Acts 16:14).

There are certain things which must be taught. The mind needs to be instructed. Certain facts about man's condition and God's answer need be explained. A man needs to know he is a sinner. A man needs to know that his sins put him in the wrong with God. A man needs to know that God is holy and righteous, and reacts to sin in judgement and condemnation. A man needs to know he cannot help himself, for God demands perfection. The Good News makes sense. God has acted in love, God has

dealt with that sin, God sent His Son to be the substitute, and on the grounds of His death, God can forgive, pardon and accept the man who turns from His sin, puts his whole trust in Christ to save, and makes Him Lord and Master.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3,4). **Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ** (Romans 10:17). But hearing is not enough. The power of God is also necessary. The Lord must act to give understanding and produce a response. We often stress that man is responsible to open the door of his heart to the Lord. But there is a sense in which the Lord opens the heart.

The result was that Lydia heard, was gripped by and responded to the Gospel. The Lord was at work in her heart, i.e. the centre of her personality, her mind, feelings and will. The heart must be touched, **for it is the wellspring of life** (Proverbs 4:23). **For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he** (Proverbs 23:7 A.V.). The heart is naturally closed to the Gospel by sin. The intellect resists the truth, the emotions do not love, and the will is not obedient to the Gospel. It is the Lord who makes this change. It is He who opens the heart, removes prejudice, awakens desires, illuminates the mind, and creates a personal concern for the message. The Gospel makes sense, it meets our needs.

The Christian makes a deliberate and definite acceptance of the Saviour. He turns from his hateful sin, leans on Christ, depends on Him, longing to follow Him and be like Him. Only God can create this change. The preacher announces the message. He can be earnest and sincere. He can bring reasons, state the case, but only the Lord can move the heart. The preacher can be used to create temporary interest, but only Christ produces lasting and spiritual change.

A drunkard once came up to Wesley and declared himself to be “one of your converts”. Wesley replied, “You must be, because you are not one of God’s.” There is something that only God can do. He can cause the deaf to hear, the blind to see, and the dead to live. No amount of sermonizing and preaching can do this. **No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him** (John 6:44).

Is this an excuse for laziness and indolence? Augustine said, “If you are not drawn by God, pray that thou mayst be drawn.” God always responds to that prayer.

The result of conversion

The first thing, as so often in Acts, is that conversion is at once followed by baptism. The inward response and the outward demonstration are always together. The two always came together in Gospel preaching: **Repent and be baptised** (Acts 2:38). It was not an optional extra a few years later. The New Testament teaches that it is the next step after a response. Taking an open and public stand for the Lord takes courage, but Lydia took it. She publicly burnt her boats. There was no going back now. Her household followed her, such was the effect of her witness. This may have included children, but they must have been old enough to make a conscious decision for Christ.

Lydia's conversion affected her home. When she opened her heart, she opened her home. It soon became the place for the believers to worship. **They went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers** (Acts 16:40). One of the marks of conversion at that time was the person's substance and home becoming the Lords. The New Testament puts stress on hospitality (Romans 12:13, 1 Peter 4:9), for it is practical love for God's people. Lydia set the tone for the whole church. Paul later wrote that the Philippian church was the only one that sent him gifts and support; hence they were his joy and crown (Philippians 4:1:14-16).

There was the social effect of Lydia's conversion also. The Gospel has radically altered the status and standing of women. Thanks to Christian influence, where in the past women were just men's slaves, they became men's companions and equals. Lydia became the first woman in Europe to receive the new honour and dignity and respect which the Gospel bestows on women, and which influences society still.

The Gospel has changed all relationships in the home, work place and society, and the different attitude to women is only one of these changes. Sangster made a list of the effects the Gospel would make if it were received by the nation:

- Pay old debts
- Reduce sexual immorality
- Disinfect the theatre
- Cut divorce rate
- Reduce juvenile crime
- Lessen prison population
- Improve output and quality of work
- Give high sense of destiny to the nation
- Make us invincible in war of ideas
- Give peace and happiness to the nation

Conclusion

Lydia was one of millions of men and women who have proved the Gospel is the power of God to Salvation for everyone who believes. Do you know its power in your own life? Have you passed from death to life? Do you have assurance that you have been forgiven? Can you say there is no condemnation awaiting you? Can you say for me to live is Christ? Do you know for certain where you will be after death?