

Sermon Series Resources

Bible bio - Lydia
Acts 16:12-15, 40

Intro

Our sermon series called “Life Lived Well” is based on Paul’s letter to the Philippians. The beginning of the church at Philippi in about 49AD, the first on the European continent, was built around some interesting first congregation members.

This study profiles the first convert mentioned at Philippi in the Book of Acts, chapter 16.

Lydia’s story

Acts 16:14-15 tells us:

One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. 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.

The Apostle Paul had a band of travelers that began with Barnabas and ended up with Silas, Timothy and Dr. Luke (the author of The Gospel according to Luke).

Paul was on a quest to visit all the churches he had been to on his first missionary journey throughout modern day Turkey. But Acts 16:6-9 tells us that God had other plans for him. In an extraordinary moment, Paul received a spiritual vision of a man who was European saying “Come over to Macedonia and help us” - Acts 16:9,10.



That night Paul had a vision. In his dream he saw a man over in Macedonia, Greece, pleading with him, “Come over here and help us.” Well, that settled it. We would go to Macedonia, for we could only conclude that God was sending us to preach the Good News there.

At this point, according to the chronology of the Book of Acts, no-one from Europe had yet heard or responded to Paul’s message of the Good News about Jesus.

So, Paul and his little band of co-workers sailed across the Aegean Sea and came eventually to the city of Philippi (a chief city of Macedonia) - Acts 16:10-12. There we find that the first convert on the European continent is a female Turkish immigrant who was a successful first century business woman.

Purple

No doubt many will remember a great epic movie of the past called “The Robe”. Richard Burton’s character takes up a quest to discover the importance of a royal purple garment and who it belonged to. The story gives us a clue about Lydia of Philippi and her success in business. The old Authorized Version of the Bible, sticking closely to the ancient Greek,



tells us that Lydia was a “seller of purple”.

A very popular poem by Jenny Joseph has amused many women today as it says

“when I am an old woman I shall wear purple, with a red hat, which doesn’t go, and doesn’t suit me”.

Purple is a dramatic colour, a daring colour. It’s easy to go a bit over the top. It’s not a colour you can ignore easily. In Lydia’s day it was a colour that signified so much more.

The dye for purple was made from a juice found in minute quantities in certain shellfish. It took thousands of crustaceans to make just a metre or two of purple cloth. So it was very expensive, “worth its weight in silver”, it was said. It was a statement of status and wealth; it was the Gucci handbag or the Rolex watch of Roman times. More than this, it was associated with the politically powerful: purple was the color worn by kings and rulers, tetrarchs and senators, and wealthy men.

And that’s what Lydia was selling. In fact, she’d travelled across the sea to establish her business in the European marketplace. She wasn’t a local. She was from Thyatira, a manufacturing town well known for making purple cloth. Interestingly, she appears to have been the head of her household and a travelling trader. And if she was the seller of purple, she’s was also most likely very wealthy.

But there’s something else you should know about Lydia. Like many Aussies today, she believed in a higher power. She believed in the God of Israel, but she wasn’t from a Jewish family or religion. She probably wasn’t Jewish, but she had come to be interested in and associated with the people of God in her city. She’s what the Jews knew as a ‘Godfearer’ – a proselyte to Judaism; someone who worshipped with Jewish people, but hadn’t converted completely to Judaism. Her home town, Thyatira was a troubled place where business came first and morality was a personal choice. She had emerged in tact financially, but her heart was searching for something more. And on a Sabbath day in her adopted city, she went to meet with some Jewish women on the river outside the city walls. She went there to seek something more than what her profitable business could afford her.

Acts mentions that there was no synagogue in the Roman colony called Philippi. This indicates not many Jews in that city at all (it took only a gathering of ten men in the ancient world to form a “synagogue”). Paul, the apostle, normally began his visit to any city by finding the local synagogue and speaking to people there about the Gospel as a visiting Rabbi. However, with no synagogue in existence at Philippi, he was forced to go find the God-seekers of the city and go to where they were at.

He must have heard that there were some spiritually thirsty people down by the riverside, and there he found a group of prayerful women. He and the other men told them about Jesus and His resurrection. Lydia found what she was spiritually searching for. She opened her heart to Jesus and became a Christian.

We went aboard a boat at Troas, and sailed straight across to Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis, and finally reached Philippi, a Roman colony just inside the

Macedonian border, and stayed there several days. On the Sabbath we went a little way outside the city to a riverbank where we understood some people met for prayer; and we taught the Scriptures to some women who came. One of them was Lydia, a saleswoman from Thyatira, a merchant of purple cloth. She was already a worshiper of God and as she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart and she accepted all that Paul was saying. She was baptized along with all her household and asked us to be her guests. "If you agree that I am faithful to the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my home." And she urged us until we did. Acts 16:12-15

Acts 16 tells us she was then baptized (was it in that river right there and then?). The group went to her "household", a term in the Book of Acts that might suggest that her slaves and business partners were then baptized as well so that the whole of her life would now change orientation towards Jesus and His Church.

Having opened her heart to God, she now opened her home and her considerable resources to help the missionaries do their work.

Some points of interest:

Several things leap out at us from these events to encourage us about following Jesus today:

1. A new church was born. With the conversion of Lydia's household and the conversion of the Philippian Jailer's household (Acts 16:33) a new church was born. It became a congregation that supported the work of spreading the Gospel throughout Macedonia and into Achaia - Philippians 1:3-5; 4:15-16. It was a congregation that understood how vital the good news of Jesus is to people who are searching for something more in life. The Philippian Jailer was one who stumbled on the truth like the one in Jesus parable of "The Hidden Treasure" (Matthew 13:44). Perhaps Lydia was more like the one in Jesus' story of "The Pearl Of Great Price" (Matthew 13:45-46), as she was searching in some way, and found that which was of greater value than any royal garment or flourishing business, she turned her life in Jesus' direction.
2. Paul models how the church might best function today - in mission mode. Paul had no choice in Philippi but to go to where the spiritual seekers were. However, he demonstrated a willingness to listen to God's leading and to talk about Jesus' love to those who had open hearts, and to those who may even be a threat to him. We are unlikely to see the Australian church grow if its current members are not missionaries in some sense in their daily lives.
3. Women and men can be partners in Gospel ministry. One of the most significant challenges to Christianity in the latter part of the 20th century came from feminism. Interestingly, not all cultures in the 1st Century Roman Empire limited the roles of women, as is often suggested. By the time the New Testament was written, parts of the Mediterranean world, even under Roman rule, allowed women to own property, head a household, engage in business, live independently of a man, and make her own life decisions. Lydia was a welcome convert to Christianity and a welcome member of the mission team. It's possible she had a hand with women like Euodia and Syntyche in establishing and leading the church at Philippi who were commended by Paul later in the letter as those who had contended alongside him in the work of the Gospel. Perhaps

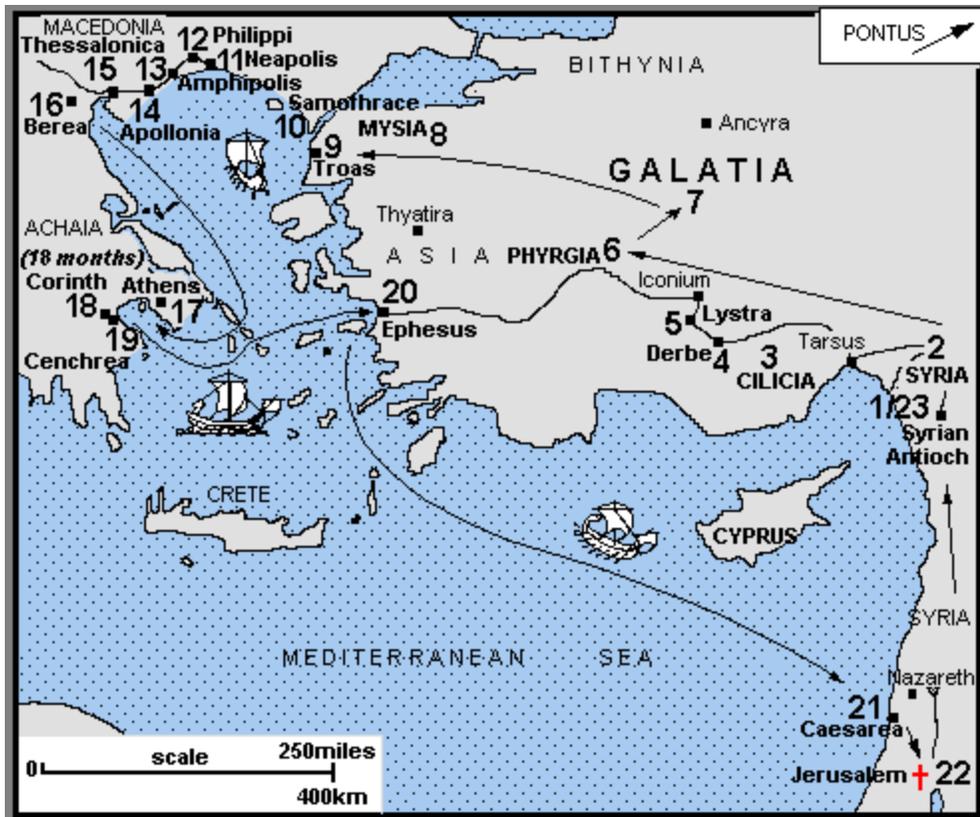
Lydia later returned to her homeland, Thyatira, where the church there is mentioned in the book of Revelation chapter 2. The appearance of Lydia in the book of Acts is, in part, an invitation to women who are similar to her today to recognize that they can have a vital place in Christian ministry. What a helpful example in today's world to find an example of church where men and women work in leadership together for the sake of the Gospel. In the example of Lydia, such women not only have nothing to fear in the church, but the Christian community should welcome and unlock their considerable gifts and contributions. Lydia joins the ranks of female leaders in New Testament churches such as Prisca (Romans 16:1) and possibly Junia (Romans 16:7) and the female prophets (I Corinthians 11:5) and other women (Acts 1:14) who exercised important leadership roles in the first century church.

4. Lastly, Lydia is a model of hospitality. Lydia is a model for those of us who would be considered middle-class and upper class Christians. I hear Lydia asking me this question, "Are you putting your money into groups and situations that genuinely further the purpose of spreading the Good News and growing God's church?" Someone has said, "*Poetry is love illustrated, hospitality is love demonstrated.*" I once witnessed a children's sermon where the minister began by asking them what they would do if a stranger knocked on their door. One child completely threw the whole thing off track -- and broke everybody up -- by answering, "I'd call 9-1-1!" So much for a lesson in hospitality! Hebrews 13:2 says, "*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.*" Some hospitable Christians have literally entertained angels, as this verse says, but others are angels, in a figurative sense, when they show hospitality to others, especially the needy. Perhaps no other model than this is needed more today. People may not enter a church to hear the Good News, but they will certainly wonder what generates such generosity from those who open their homes freely. This was the catalyst for a new church community to begin in Europe, the beachhead for a revolution in history. Could your hospitality and witness be the key to the growth of the real church in Australia?

Further notes on Paul's 2nd missionary journey

According to the Book of Acts, Paul and Silas took a young preacher named Timothy with them on their travels. Timothy's mother was a Jewish woman who was a believer in Jesus, and his father was a Greek. His became an important background, helping to facilitate challenges and opportunities for sharing with different people groups.

As they traveled, the Holy Spirit would guide them and tell them where to go next. One night while they were at Troas, possible the site of ancient Troy, Paul had a vision. A man from Macedonia was begging him to come over to Macedonia to help them. The Spirit was guiding them again. Immediately they got ready and left. It was a long trip by ship from Troas to Macedonia. They arrived at Philippi, which was a Roman colony and one of the largest cities in Macedonia.



On the map above, you can trace Paul's journey. Start at #9, Troas, and go to #12, Philippi.

The Apostle Paul had received a vision to travel to Macedonia. He was compelled to bring the Gospel to this former region of Greece, now part of the Roman Empire. Paul set off by boat across the Aegean Sea and arrived at the city of Philippi, ten miles inland, a Roman colony and military outpost. His reception wasn't too friendly. On the entrance to the city was a posted a sign barring any unauthorized religions.

According to Acts 16, they stayed several days. Then they heard that a group of people met by the river to worship on the Sabbath day, so they went outside the city gate to the meeting place. They sat down and began to speak to the women who were gathered there to pray. One of them was a woman named Lydia who was from the city of Thyatira, which was in a district east of Macedonia, whose story is explained above.