

THE CONVERSION OF LYDIA

Acts 16:12-15

Many times Paul planned a course which he was not permitted to pursue. He wanted to go to Bithynia, one of the richest provinces of Asia Minor, but the Holy Spirit forbade his going. When he got to Troas, he received a vision of a man, who cried, "Come over into Macedonia, and help us." That vision made a tremendous impression on Paul. He interpreted it as a call from the Lord to preach the gospel in Europe. A ship was ready for them, so Paul and his companions hastened across the gulf and went to the important and thriving city of Philippi, the metropolis of Macedonia in Greece. Unnoticed, they went to an inexpensive inn.

Evidently Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke did not announce their arrival. The Scriptures simply state, "We were in that city abiding certain days." It is interesting to note the conduct of these newcomers in this strange city. They tarried a few days before doing anything. As they went about the streets and made inquiry they discovered that there wasn't any synagogue in the city. This fact was due to the scarcity of Jews residing there. If there had been ten male Jews of any prominence, there could have been a synagogue, and doubtless would have been.

While looking for a place to begin their evangelistic efforts, they learned that there was a place outside the city walls, on the bank of a river, where some were accustomed to gather for the purpose of communion with the Heavenly Father. It would seem that religious meetings were not permitted in the city, so all semblance of religious life had to be carried on elsewhere. Apparently it was permissible to hold prayer meetings outside the city limits. So, there were those who were accustomed to turn from the hum and bustle of the city and to retire into the solitude and sublimities of nature. Thinking that those who had a desire to pray would be ready to hear God's message, Paul and his companions turned their backs on the city with its bustle, gaiety and sin and went out there to the quiet place by the riverside. On arrival at the place of prayer and worship they found only women assembled there.

What a wonderful scene is here presented to us! When Paul came into the midst of that worshipping company of women, he sat down and had a friendly talk with them. A sermon would have been out of place, but a quiet talk was the very sort of thing that was needed. We have no reason to speculate as to the gist of his remarks. Paul had but one subject, and that was Christ; the Christ Who had met him on his way to Damascus and saved him; and the Christ Who was still able, willing and anxious to save. To these women who had resorted thither Paul talked about Christ and the life which is obtained through faith in Him. He did that which the least gifted and the most timid of us can do, namely, declare the great truths of the gospel of Christ, with a special emphasis on the salvation of all sinners who will put their trust in Him as their Saviour.

Among the women in attendance at this prayer meeting was Lydia. She was an alert and successful business woman from Thyatira, a city of diversified industries. It was the center of the dyeing industry. The dyers there made a peculiar purple, which was prized very highly by the Romans. Lydia was a dealer in this purple. For the sale of the colored fabrics the services of a capable woman were well-nigh indispensable. Having remarkable ability in this field, this exceptional business woman was evidently quite prosperous and in splendid circumstances. It is probable that she resided in Philippi a part of the time to dispose of her goods.

Lydia was a proselyte to the Hebrew faith. Even though she had been born outside the ranks of the Chosen People, and without any direct share in the truths and traditions which had come down from Abraham and Moses and the long line of the prophets, she had accepted the Jewish faith. When she had come into contact with the Jews and they had taught her about God, Who had made heaven, earth and the seas, and all that were in them, she had turned from paganism with all of its vanity and abominations and had embraced Judaism.

Thereafter Lydia made much of her opportunities. She always carried her religion along with her business, no matter how far from home she happened to go. To the extent of her knowledge she sought diligently to serve God. She brought to her religious duties the same earnestness and clear-eyed intelligence that she exercised in her commercial enterprises.

There was neither a synagogue nor a church in Philippi to which she could go, but Lydia was devout enough to close up her business in a pagan city and find her place on the Jewish Sabbath with those who wanted to pray. She was faithful in her observance of the day set apart for rest and worship by the law of God. Her heart was in this matter, so she did not consider it a hardship to attend prayer meetings and to worship with others. Perhaps those meetings out there under the open sky and on the bank of the river were not especially spiritual, but she considered it her duty to attend them, and she made it a practice to do so. She used the light which God granted to her.

It is easy for us to see God's handiwork in bringing Paul to Philippi. The working of providence was equally manifested in bringing Lydia there. The wills of Paul and Lydia were so moved and actuated by divine providence that these two people met. To her, to discover and to do the divine will constituted the supreme privilege and joy of life.

Desiring spiritual help, Lydia took pains to be present at the time and place at which she was sure she would most likely receive this help. If one is to receive a divine blessing, he must be where that blessing is most likely to be bestowed. Lydia was in the right place, with the right people, and at the proper time. She was there in the right spirit also. She wanted to get all the inspiration and blessing of the wonderful words of the Apostle Paul.

Lydia had a nature highly sensitive to religious influences. Appeals made to her spiritual faculties and hungerings met a quick response. She had a clear perception that this life is not all, and that loyalty to one's own soul means proper attention to things invisible and immortal.

When Paul began to speak there was one hearer who listened to him with a peculiar interest. The rapt attention of this intelligent woman drew the very best from Paul. He proclaimed the gospel of Christ and spoke out of the depths of his great heart. Lydia attended to the things that were spoken by him. Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, her mind was quickened to understand the glorious truths of the gospel of Christ, and her heart was made willing and even eager to receive the grace of God in Christ. Her heart was opened by the Lord so that she accepted Christ as her Saviour, and passed over from the Jewish to the Christian faith. She was the first person to become a Christian in Europe. It is interesting to note that an important work of Christianity in Europe during these intervening centuries has been the elevation of womanhood.

Lydia was not ashamed to confess Christ as her Saviour. Without any delay she followed her Lord in baptism. Apparently she did not give even a passing thought to the effect of this event on her business. She did not ask whether it would be likely to increase or to decrease her popularity. We admire her devotion to Christ. She brought to Him all her enthusiasm, earnestness and talents. She became as zealous for Him as she had ever been for herself. At once she began to witness for her Saviour and ere long she had won the members of her household and those associated with her in business to a saving knowledge in Christ.

Apparently Lydia had a house in Philippi that was large enough to accommodate the missionaries in addition to her own household. She also had ample means to entertain these men comfortably while they were in the city. Immediately and graciously Lydia extended Christian hospitality to those missionaries to whom she felt so greatly indebted for the new light which they had brought to her.

This was one of the first forms of Christian service that opened to her, and she entered upon it without question or hesitation. "Given to hospitality" was a lesson which she learned without any difficulty. She was determined to prove her love for Christ by helping His servants in whatever way she could. So, she opened her house and constrained them to make her home the base of their operations. Love for the people of God has ever been a distinguishing mark of a true convert.

This enthusiastic and consecrated Christian woman opened her house as a place of worship also. In her home a church was established. It became a great church; in fact, one of the greatest in all Europe. Paul always loved it devotedly. The Epistle to the Philippians reveals how Paul's heart went out in love and devotion to that church which began with the conversion of Lydia and the hospitality of her home.

It is impossible to admire a professed conversion if it does not touch the professor's substance. Those who pretend to be Christians, and yet live only for themselves, and do nothing for Christ or His churches, give very poor evidence of having been born again.

From this story we learn not to despise the day of small things. Lydia's heart was a doorway for the conversion of millions in Europe. Seemingly that was a poor service which an unlearned layman conducted when he spoke pointedly to a young fellow named Spurgeon. But when he won Spurgeon to Christ, he won a multitude through him. It seemed to be a matter of small importance when a certain layman spoke to an uneducated shoe salesman in Boston, but when he won Dwight L. Moody to Christ he brought two continents closer to God. You never know when the seemingly insignificant is going to be the supremely great.