

## LYDIA'S CONVERSION

Acts 16:12-15

Paul frequently planned a course which he was not permitted to pursue. Much of his life was a patchwork of revised plans because of divine intervention. In spite of his disappointments, Paul maintained the conviction that God had a plan for his life, a pattern for his character, and an ideal for his soul. He fully believed that God would lead him in the way that was best. Very few people have an opportunity to live their lives on the basis of their first choices. Most of us know something of broken plans, frustrated ambitions, and promising doors being closed just when we were about to pass through them. Perhaps it was illness, or misfortune, or some unexpected and unaccountable turn of events that put an end to our hopes.

God guides His servants who are obedient to Him. Sometimes He closes doors to them and opens others into greater fields of service. That was what he did in Paul's case. Paul planned and expected to continue preaching the gospel in Asia, but God shut that door because He wanted him to go elsewhere and deliver His message. Of Paul and his companions we read: "After they were come to Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not" (Acts 16:7). It is a strange procedure when the Holy Spirit forbids the preaching of the gospel of Christ, but that is what happened when He twice closed the door to its delivery in Asia. It was not that Asia did not need the gospel, but the Lord needed and wanted these men to go westward and preach in Europe.

After his plans had been thwarted by the Holy Spirit, he finally landed at Troas on the sea coast. There he and his party stopped in order to find out where the Lord wanted them to go. On his first night in Troas, Paul had a vision of a European, standing with outstretched arms, and begging: "Come over into Macedonia, and help us." This vision made clear to Paul the meaning of the closed doors. In that vision a need was revealed, and God's call seems to have consisted in the presentation of that need. What a splendid example of divine guidance! From this incident we learn that the Holy Spirit is just as active and faithful in closing doors as He is in opening them. The stops, as well as the steps, of good men are ordered of the Lord. For this reason, we ought to recognize God's hand as being in the "shut-ins" as much as it is in the "open-outs." The Holy Spirit knows where each Christian worker is needed most, and He alone can direct to that place. When the Word of God, and the providences of God, and the Spirit of God agree, then one may be assured beyond a doubt that the way of God has been found. This unusual vision made a tremendous impression on Paul, and he decided that it was the call of the Lord for him to go to Macedonia, and the direction of the Spirit for him to go to Europe, and the will of God for the gospel to be carried to the West.

When morning came, Paul told his companions what he had seen the night before. God had not revealed His will to them merely to satisfy their curiosity, but in order that they might do what He wanted them to do. As soon as the divine will was known, these missionaries responded promptly, neither questioning the wisdom of God nor delaying their action, for before noon they were on the water sailing to Europe. Due to favorable winds, the voyage was completed in the remarkably short time of two days, or less than half the time that was usually required, which goes to show that God always does His part when His children do His bidding.

### I. The Place.

After Paul and his companions had hastened across the gulf, they immediately went to the important and thriving city of Philippi, the metropolis of Macedonia in Greece, and one of the most strategic sites in all of Europe. Not only was it on the main trade route from the west to the east, but various circumstances combined to make it a very

prosperous city. The plains nearby were well watered and fertile. The gold and silver mines in the neighborhood had made the city a great commercial center. Caesar Augustus had granted Philippi the status and privileges of a Roman colony, whereupon the citizens enjoyed all the rights of Roman citizenship.

## II. The People.

It is interesting to observe the conduct of these missionaries — Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke — after their arrival in the noted city of Philippi. No welcoming committee met them. They did not make themselves known for a few days. Paul did not find the man in Philippi whom he had seen in a vision and had heard calling him to come to Macedonia and help. Neither did he and his companions find a church in the city. As they passed along the streets and inquired, they discovered that there was not a synagogue in the city, due to the scarcity of Jews residing there. If there had been ten male Jews of any prominence, doubtless there would have been a synagogue.

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 a few devout people were in the habit of assembling on the Sabbath for the purpose of communion with God. The missionaries hunted this prayer-meeting group. What crowd do you seek when you are in a strange place? The answer to this question will reveal your true character. 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 on the bank of the river. Upon their arrival at the place of prayer and worship, they found women only assembled there. These God-fearing ladies did not know Christ in the pardon of their sins, but they did have enough religion to cause them to attend prayer meeting, which is more than most church members today have.

## III. The Proselyte.

Among the various women at the prayer meeting was Lydia, a hard-working and successful business woman, a seller of purple, from Thyatira, a city of diversified industries and the center of the dyeing industry. The dyers there made a peculiar purple, which was prized very highly by the Romans. Naturally, for the sale of the colored fabrics the services of a capable woman were almost indispensable. Possessing remarkable ability in this field, this exceptional business woman was quite prosperous and in splendid circumstances. It is probable that she resided in Philippi a part of the time in order to dispose of her goods more profitably.

Lydia was a proselyte to the Jewish faith. Even though she had been born outside the ranks of the Chosen People, and was therefore 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. Having come in contact with the Jews, who had taught her about God, Who had made heaven, earth, and the seas, and all that was in them, she had turned from paganism, with all of its vanity and abominations, and had embraced Judaism. Although she was not a Christian as yet, she was a worshiper of the God of Israel. To the extent of her knowledge she sought diligently to serve God. No matter how far from home she happened to go, she brought to her religious duties the same intelligence and earnestness that she exercised in her commercial enterprises. She was devout enough to close up her place of business on the day which God had set apart for worship and rest, and to go to the prayer meeting that was held by the river-side under the open sky. She considered it a privilege and a duty to attend the services there, and she made it a practice to do so. She used all of the light that God had granted to her. No doubt she was honest, moral, and upright, but, like all others, she was a sinner and needed salvation through Christ.

#### IV. The Preacher.

Anyone can talk about a preacher. It requires some knowledge, training, understanding, and experience to talk about the work of all other professions, callings and lines of business, but none of these things are required when it comes to discussing the work of those in the ministry. This is the one thing that anyone understands and considers himself perfectly competent to discuss. Nearly everybody knows exactly how preaching and the numerous other tasks of a minister should be done, except those whom God has called and commissioned and whom some church has invited to occupy the pulpit. Notwithstanding all that those whom God has not called to preach the gospel of Christ may say about the work of the ministry, it is the highest calling that any man has ever received.

Like all other God-called preachers, the Apostle Paul had a vision of human need. Consequently, he did not attempt to give people what they wanted to hear, but he did his best to minister to their deepest needs. He did not try to please people, which is always an utter impossibility, but he did strive to help them. As an ambassador of Christ, he had been sent to proclaim God's Word to the people. He sought to do it in such a way as to please the Lord and to help his listeners.

#### V. The Preaching.

We have no reason for speculating as to the gist of Paul's message to Lydia and the others who attended that prayer meeting. 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 all who would believe on Him. Paul spoke face to face and heart to heart about what Christ had done for him, and about the things that were fundamental in his own life. To these women who had resorted thither Paul preached about Christ and the life which is obtained through faith in Him. He informed them that Christ would save every sinner who would put his or her trust in Him as Saviour.

#### VI. The Power.

Lydia was present at the time and place at which she would be most likely to receive the instruction which she needed. God always works through human instrumentality and sends His message through human lips, so He sent His prepared messenger to the place where there was a prepared heart waiting to receive His Word. This incident should serve as a reminder to us that, if one would receive the blessing of God, he must be where that blessing is to be bestowed. Lydia was in the right place, with the right people, at the right time, and with the right spirit.

God created Lydia with the capability of hearing intelligently. She listened with peculiar interest to the preaching of the gospel by Paul. Her rapt attention drew the very best from Paul. She sought to catch every word that fell from his lips. It is always a joyous privilege for any man of God to preach the gospel of Christ to those who are eagerly hungering after the truth. With an open mind Lydia listened to the preaching of the gospel of Christ by the Apostle Paul. Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit her mind was quickened to understand the glorious truths of the gospel. The Lord opened her heart and enabled her to yield her will to the will of God and to receive the grace of God in Christ. It was a supernatural work, as the work of salvation is in every case. It was assuredly a work of grace, for the Word of God expressly says, "whose heart the Lord opened." Lydia did not open her own heart. Her prayers did not open it. Paul did not open Lydia's heart. The Lord Himself opened her heart and enabled her to receive the things which make for peace. Open-hearted hearing of the gospel never fails to bring blessings. Hearing sermons will not necessarily be a blessing. Heeding the truth we hear in sermons will result in great blessings to those who listen — it will bless sinners unto salvation, and bless saints unto service. This will not only be a blessing to men, but it will also glorify the Lord.

It is strictly the task of the preacher to preach the Word of God, and then it is the Lord's business to open the heart of the hearer. The gospel of Christ has to be preached before the Holy Spirit can open the heart of the sinner for the reception of Christ as Saviour. Lydia listened attentively to the gospel of Christ, whereupon the Lord opened her heart, enlightened her understanding, enabled her to repent of her sins and to receive Christ as her Saviour. She was saved just as soon as she received Christ. Lydia was the first person in Europe to become a Christian.

#### VII. The Proof.

When Lydia received Christ and was saved, she immediately confessed her faith in Him and was baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In her baptism Lydia acknowledged her death to the old life of sin. Apparently she did not give even a passing thought as 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. She gave ample evidence that a real change or transformation had taken place in her life. She promptly dedicated her time, talents, energies, and enthusiasm to Christ her Saviour. Lydia became even more zealous for Christ than she had ever been for herself. Forthwith she became an enthusiastic Christian and a faithful witness for Christ. As a result of her Christian testimony and influence the members of her family and household were saved and baptized also.

Apparently Lydia had a house in Philippi that was large enough to accommodate a number of others in addition to the members of her own household. She also had ample means with which to entertain guests. Lydia promptly extended cordial and gracious hospitality to Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke, the missionaries to whom she felt so greatly indebted for the new light and life which had come to her through their ministry. She was determined to prove her love for Christ by helping His servants in whatever way she could. She testified to her oneness with the saints by constraining Paul and his co-workers to abide in her house. Her constraining them implied that she had to overcome their reluctance. Evidently they did not want to impose on her. At any rate, she expressed her gratitude by opening her home to the servants of the Lord and by urging them to make it the base of their operations. Love for the servants of God has ever been a distinguishing mark of those who have been saved. Doubtless Lydia was fully aware of the probable sacrifice which this step would involve. Many, including her best customers in the city, would cease to associate with her and to transact business with her after it became known that she had aligned herself with these missionaries who were "everywhere spoken against." But none of these things interfered with Lydia's commitment to Christ and her loyal devotion to His faithful servants, to whom she felt so greatly indebted for teaching her the way of salvation and introducing her to the Saviour.