

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Reach: Lydias”

Dr. Jay Howell

Acts 16:11-15

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We left off last week with Paul, Silas, and Timothy boldly setting out to cross over into Macedonia, following a vision Paul had had. This marked the first incursion of the gospel into what we would call continental Europe. We talked last week how the crossing gets messy, and this week as we follow Paul and his group into Macedonia, we find that rarely if ever do things go according to plan. Let’s go to God’s Word together. Acts 16:11-15:

We therefore set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Spirit of God, we praise you for your faithfulness is assured, though in your mystery we never quite know which way your wind will blow. We pray for your presence among us this day, that you would open our hearts anew to hear your Word, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I wonder what, if anything, Paul and his group were expecting once they crossed over into Macedonia. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe they weren’t expecting anything. Maybe they had realized that their whole trajectory to even get to Macedonia should have been signal enough that they shouldn’t go with any expectations. After all, as you’ll remember from last week, they had first tried going one way, but God said no. Then they went another way, and again God said no. But then finally Paul’s vision in the night of a man of Macedonia calling out, “Come over to Macedonia and help us,” led them to cross over and gave them direction.

So maybe they would’ve learned to expect the unexpected, to go with the flow, as the Spirit leads, that sort of thing.

Or, maybe once they had gotten the clarity of where they were supposed to head, they thought, awesome. We have our bearings. Now it’s time to get to work. Now it’s time to do what we do best.

They set off from Troas, in northwestern modern-day Turkey, and after a couple of stops, make their way to one of the leading cities in the area, a city called Philippi. If you’ve ever heard of the Book of Philippians, or Paul’s letter to the Philippians, same place; that’s a letter written later to the church that emerged in this city.

So they get there, and just from some of the signals in the text, something's different about the place. We noted last week that crossing over into Macedonia meant going into something else. Much of the ancient world they lived in was heavily influenced by the Greeks and the Romans, but this was different, and Philippi kind of represented that.

Philippi was a city founded by Alexander the Great's father, so its roots are far more Greek and Macedonian than anything they had encountered before. Plus, it had been made into a Roman colony, which meant that the Romans had reorganized the city some 70 years earlier to be something of a mini-Rome.

And the way we can tell that this is the way they go about their evangelism in the city. If you did a close look at the methods Paul used throughout his missionary journeys, his most common process upon coming to a new city, a city in which there was not a church, a city in which he and his group were the first bearers of the gospel of Jesus, was not to go to, say, a central plaza or maybe the city market, or even the steps of whatever the local temple was. He would most often go to the local synagogue, and when he spoke publicly, his audience was predominantly those at the synagogue, that is, the Jews in that city.

Now there's some irony in that, being that Paul has been pounding the table about the inclusion of the Gentiles, about not putting obstacles in front of those who weren't here yet. That's what Paul's been emphasizing this whole time, but where would he go first thing in a new city, more often than not? To a gathering of Gentiles? No. To the synagogue.

But did they do that here? No. Why not? Because it looks like there wasn't one. Nearly everywhere else they went seemed to have a synagogue, that is, there was a sizable enough Jewish community to support one. But here, Luke tells us they were there for "some days," but not that they went to the synagogue. Instead, presumably after they discover that there's no such place in Philippi, they head out for what they guess is a "place of prayer" outside the city, an informal gathering place for worship, and they speak with the women who had gathered there.

And there they meet a woman named Lydia, someone who's described as a "worshiper of God," probably noting that she was a Gentile sympathizer with the Jewish faith. She wasn't from there but it seemed it was a home base for her. She was a business woman, specializing in purple cloth, which meant either she was well off or at least her customers were. And as she was there outside the city by the river at this place of prayer, she listens to what these men from across the water were saying.

And it said, "The Lord opened her heart." She and then by her leadership her whole household were baptized. (And by the way, if you've ever been curious as to why we baptize babies in the Presbyterian church, that is, why we baptize those who have no idea what's going on, this passage is among the reasons: the faith of the head of a household, of a parent, leading to the claiming of God's promises upon those under that same blessing. If you've ever wanted to know more about that sort of thing, let's talk.)

Blink and you'll miss it, but what we've just been told of is the first convert to faith in Christ in Europe.

And suffice it to say, this wasn't on Paul's bingo card. This was not a circumstance he was expecting.

Think about it. He sees a vision to cross over to Macedonia, more specifically, a vision with a *man* of Macedonia calling him to cross over. They go over, they hop around, then they land in a city they think would be a good base of operations. They settle in, but they discover there's no synagogue, which means the whole playbook they're used to, their usual method for evangelism, is out the window. So instead, they go outside the city along the river, where they suppose is an informal gathering place, and instead any *men* of Macedonia, they find a

gathering of women there. And then, as they're talking with this group, the one person who actually responds is a woman who isn't even from there but instead, ironically, is from back over in Asia Minor where they just left.

Point is, someone like Lydia isn't who Paul was expecting. And I think that's a beautiful thing. Right out of the gates in this new crossing, this new frontier for the gospel, do we find Paul hitting his stride, honing his craft as an evangelist, maybe brushing up his talking points? I mean maybe he's doing all that. It just didn't happen here. The setting, the audience, you name it, none of it is what Paul could have planned for.

But it's not Paul who's really doing the work. What does it say? V. 14, "The Lord opened her heart." And what an impact from those few words.

I mean think of the immediate impact. As Paul continues his ministry in Philippi, he gets into some trouble, as we'll find out next week. And where is the place of safety? Where is home base in what would become a hostile city? Lydia's house.

Or later on, when Paul writes back to the church, when he writes what we know as the Letter to the Philippians, it's a word of joy, giving thanks for the faithfulness and humility and love of this church. And where did this church start meeting? Lydia's house.

Or even more broadly than that, the gospel spreading into continental Europe, that first affirmation that God was indeed going to be at work, that Paul and his group hadn't severely misread that vision Paul had had to cross over, the first sign that they were on the right track? Lydia.

What unexpected, glorious blessings have come because the Lord opened the heart of this woman?

A great question I would invite you to ask yourself is, who's your Lydia? Who's been the one whose impact in faith in your life is simply impossible to quantify?

Some of you may remember that for me, the two greatest influences on faith for me are two women, my mother and my grandmother. My mother in raising me in the faith. My grandmother—my paternal grandmother, as it happened—a Methodist minister herself, modeling in real time what a life in ministry can look like. Those are some Lydias. I just might know of one more; I live with one, shaping the faith of our kids. Who's your Lydia?

And not just who's your Lydia, not just who has been the one who God used to open the doors of your heart in faith, who might you be a Lydia for? For whom could you be the one that they look back on and remember, wow, this whole faith thing, it started with you, or I can't imagine what life and faith would look like now without you?

It could be through the expected things. After all, it's not like Paul was doing wrong going to the synagogue in each city, the things he was used to doing, the tried-and-true methods. It could be through things you might imagine would have an impact. The evening prayers, the blessings at the Table, reading the Bible together, being a Sunday school teacher, joining in service and fellowship. All those things. Those are good things, tried and true.

But like Paul going out to the place of prayer outside the city, it could be through the unexpected things that God uses you to open someone's heart to the gospel.

We've been talking a lot about this campaign obviously the past five weeks, about the impact of the building updates, the impact of our partnership with Olive Tree Early Learning Academy. And on one hand, yeah, there are the expected ways that updates to a building can foster greater fellowship and connection, and there are

expected ways that support and relationship with a ministry like Olive Tree can directly impact children and families, especially these households led by single mothers. There are expected ways.

But you know what I'm excited about too? All the unexpected ways. Because we can do all the things that might be part of tried-and-true methods; we can be faithful to them. But as we saw with Paul, Silas, and Timothy in the city of Philippi, it's not about rolling out a playbook. As we see with Lydia, ultimately it's the Lord who opens the heart.

My grandmother, my dad's mom, Nana as I shared a minute ago, was herself a Methodist minister. She went to divinity school after her kids had grown, but faith was of course a big part of what she hoped to cultivate in her home. As sometimes happens though, the seeds of faith don't always grow in the timing we might hope for, and long story short, for two of her three kids, the notion of faith and Christ and the church just didn't emerge as a major part of their lives.

Her youngest, my uncle, had been one of the two for whom faith really was more of a suggestion, and his life somewhat reflected that. Not antagonistic or anything, but amorphous, not committed, not having a strong claim on his life. And as I got older, and as I discerned my own call into ministry, she shared the regret she had, not at herself necessarily, just regret, that faith for one reason or another hadn't taken root for him.

Years later, my uncle got sick, and Nana endured every parent's fear. This would've been thirteen years ago when he died, and it was in his last few weeks, as can sometimes happen, communication and function became more difficult.

I remember one evening in the hospital room. I was there with my uncle and with Nana. It was mostly quiet more than anything else. By that point it was tough for my uncle to say anything. But then, I remember my grandmother beginning to sing a few familiar hymns, hymns she grew up with, hymns her children had grown up with, just something to fill the air and maybe give her dying son a bit of comfort. And then piercing through the fog of illness, my uncle surprised us both by joining in, singing along.

I can't claim that a soul was saved that evening, or anything like that. I can't claim to know what work the Lord may or may not have done in my uncle. I just know that something was opened, something that neither I nor my grandmother was expecting.

But may we look to be Lydias, never knowing what of our efforts the Lord might use to open a heart.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.