

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, WA

April 29, 2012

Acts 16:6-15

Lessons from Lydia

1. *Lessons in amazing grace*
2. *Lessons in worshipping the Lord*
3. *Lessons in faithful stewardship*

Hymns: 154 - 375 –
Distribution: 489, 487 –
Closing: 486 (vv. 1,2)

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Acts 16:6-15 – Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

¹¹ *From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis.¹² From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.*

Have you ever associated yourself with a Bible believer?

- Perhaps there are some young boys who have put themselves in David’s shoes as he faced Goliath and dreamed of how they would defeat the giant as well.

- Perhaps some have dreamed of being Noah and building the ark to survive the flood.
- Maybe some here have thought about what it would have been like to be Peter, bold and confident.

However, I don’t think many here today ever associated themselves with the New Testament believer Lydia. Today we are going to do just that. We’re going to look at the one account we have in Scripture and learn lessons for our faith from her.

We will learn:

1. *Lessons in amazing grace*
2. *Lessons in worshipping the Lord*
3. *Lessons in faithful stewardship*

1. Lessons in amazing grace

We certainly see God’s amazing grace in how Lydia came into contact with Paul and the gospel message. As our story begins in Acts 16, a strange circumstance was taking place. Paul was on his 2nd missionary trip, and he and his companions were traveling through Asia Minor. Paul’s plan was to head to the northern part of Asia Minor, as a number of congregations had already been founded in the interior. However, we hear: *“(They) traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.”*

A look at a map would be helpful in seeing how the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Jesus prevented them from going farther north in Asia! So they continued their westward journey through the continent until they reached the Aegean Sea. What now? We hear, *“During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”*

The Lord wanted them to go to Europe. The province across the way was Macedonia, modern day Yugoslavia. So we read that they boarded a ship to travel across the sea to the west to catch the main road that led to Rome. The first significant city along the way? Philippi.

Philippi was not a logical place (humanly speaking) to attempt Christian mission work.

Caesar Augustus had taken this city and given it the status of being a Roman colony. He made it into a “little Rome” with all rights and privileges. Latin would have been spoken there. Roman coins and dress would be used. Many retired military men from the Roman Empire settled there. This would be a strategic place on the eastern front for Rome to have a loyal outpost.

Acts 16 continues, *“On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.”* Because of the Roman loyalty there, it appears that few Jews lived in the city. Later in this chapter we learn about an anti-Jewish sentiment that existed here. As Paul arrives, we hear that he could not follow his normal way of beginning mission work, which was to go to the Jewish synagogue and begin talking with people who were familiar with the Old Testament. There was no Jewish synagogue! Ten men were needed to start a synagogue. The best he could do was go to the river outside of town and speak with a group of women who gathered there on the Sabbath.

There Paul meets Lydia: *“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.”* We hear that she is a dealer in purple cloth. This profession sustained her household, and hearing of no husband, we surmise that she might have been a widow. These days, with our synthetic dyes, we’re used to getting any color we want when we want it. If you’d like a purple accent in your home, run over to the home improvement store and have them mix up a gallon of paint or two. If you wanted to dye some Easter eggs purple, just drop in the purple tablet in from your decorating pack.

It wasn’t so simple in Lydia’s day. The dye for purple came from a tiny secretion from a species of snail. It took thousands of snails to produce enough dye to make a couple yards of purple cloth. It was expensive to wear purple. Therefore, wearing purple was either a statement of status or wealth, like a Gucci handbag or a Rolex watch today. We can understand why Lydia had moved to Philippi from Thyatira. It was the color for royalty and high governmental officials, which made for good business. And with Philippi being on the main road toward Rome, the trade route would have been to her advantage.

Lydia was a Gentile woman who was a “proselyte,” a believer in the Jewish Old Testament (OT) religion and the God of Scripture. She would have been at the synagogue if there had been one. As Paul speaks to the group gathered at the river that day, it’s clear what happened: God opened her heart to believe Paul’s message. Paul brought the news that Jesus Christ had come as God’s Son and the promised Messiah of the OT, and he had fulfilled God’s law and died for the sin of the world. He had risen victoriously over sin and death, and he had ascended back into heaven. He was the fulfillment and completion of what Lydia had learned in the Law of Moses.

It is clear that God opened her heart and moved her to believe this message. After all, that is how conversion works. God changes hearts; individuals don’t change their own hearts. We have many other passages of Scripture that teach us this:

- *“The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Corinthians 2:14)*
- *“To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.” (John 1:12,13)*
- *“No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:3)*

At that river the Holy Spirit opened her heart to believe in the One who had worn a purple robe as he was mocked, and then who suffered and died, so that her salvation could be won and so she could live by the River of Life, as Revelation pictures heaven.

As we think about this whole account, what a story of God’s grace Lydia’s is!

- Grace that Paul came to Philippi in the first place
- Grace that even in that unique city the gospel could be taught
- Grace to find the river and the group of women gathered there
- Grace that Lydia’s heart could be changed

What is your “grace story?” How has God’s amazing grace come to you and changed you forever? We all do have an “account” that could be recorded like Lydia’s. We all have a story of how God has come to us individually. What is yours?

- Being baptized and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit and forgiveness as an infant?
- Having a childhood friend who brought you to Sunday School or VBS at their church?
- Dating a Christian who shared their faith with you?
- Marrying someone who brought you into God’s Church?

In some way, God has come into your life and found you with his amazing grace.

In the face of this clear description of how God converts hearts, some churches today teach falsely that an unconverted person must “make their decision” to believe in Christ, and “choose” to be in his family and be saved. They teach that you need to invite the Holy Spirit and Christ in, rather than God opening the hearts of heathens to believe. Don’t be fooled! **By the same grace he showed to Lydia he has converted you by opening your heart to believe the gospel message. What a lesson in amazing grace!**

2. Lessons in worshiping the Lord

We learn a second lesson from Lydia as we look at how she was expressing her faith in the God of Scripture when Paul encountered her. We see how she desired to worship her God and we learn from her worship.

What do we see in her worship life?

1. Lydia was blessed with a thriving business in the art of purple fabric in her day. She likely made a good profit! The fact that she could invite four missionaries to her home to stay with her household and make it a base of operations later in this account shows us she was greatly blessed with a spacious home. (Could you invite four men to stay indefinitely?) Yet she did not consider her life to be “charmed” by her financial blessings and going along just fine to the point of neglecting worship.

In American society, such success can be detrimental for a person’s spiritual life. How many people today are blessed and

profitable in many ways, and feel that God is “smiling down on me” as I am, and therefore lose the urgency to worship in his house each week? It is only by the grace of God that a successful business man or woman can actually remember their status before God.

2. Undoubtedly, Lydia was a busy woman. It must certainly have been challenging and stressful to be a business woman dealing in purple cloth in a busy city. Don’t underestimate the challenges of being a business woman in those days! Yet her busy-ness and work requirements did not get in the way of her worship time.

What a great example for our challenges in time and schedules to remember what is most important on the weekly calendar! Many people today get caught up in the pursuits of work and business and forget the importance of “Remembering the Sabbath Day.” They say, “I don’t have time to go to church because of my work schedule.” Or perhaps early service can be attended, but not Bible Class because “I have to get going; I have things to do!” Or maybe they get irritated if the service goes over an hour.

3. What about distance? Looking at Lydia’s circumstances, we see today that the river where worship was held was a mile outside the city gate. How long would it take to close her door, walk through the city, and head a mile outside of town? Yet distance did not keep her from going.

How many people in our age of convenient travel can’t find the time to travel a distance to God’s house? A 45-minute drive could be shorter than Lydia’s travel that day! And I wonder if we all do the same when out of town or on vacation. Will we drive at any length to find our nearest WELS church to worship at?

4. Another fact about Lydia’s worship is that there was no pastor to remind her of the importance of gathering around God’s Word. There was a “vacancy,” so to speak. Yet despite that lack of connection, she

needed no encouragement to worship that day.

How many today need the constant reminder from their pastor of the importance of hearing God's Word in worship, or else they become straying sheep?

5. And what about the group? If we look at the outward appearance of the church that gathered at the river, we might think that it was a pretty small group with a pretty poor facility! Yet the treasure that they gathered around was their joy and delight.

Unfortunately, some people today rue the fact that their WELS church gathering isn't as big as they'd like or doesn't have as many their age as they'd like or as many ministry programs as they'd prefer. They feel that a change to a church that has doctrinal differences is a good move for those reasons. Or how many pastors haven't spoken to a member that has moved out of their area because they want to encourage them to transfer to the nearest WELS church, and the member says that they're not excited by the WELS church there. It's "not the same" as their former church and the group is a bit small. How sad, for the Word – not the group – is the important thing!

6. Finally, we also see Lydia's attitude as the Christian missionaries speak at the river. She is eager to learn more. She hears more about the God that she had become acquainted with in the OT. She is an eager learner.

Sometimes pastors today hear a church member excuse their attendance at weekly worship by saying, "I know the basics that I need to know." Or "I've heard so many sermons growing up that I know most of the Scriptures." This is not looking at the Bible as the bottomless well that it is. Nobody is done growing and "knows it all" in the Scripture's teachings.

What lessons in worshipping the Lord we see in the life of Lydia!

3. Lessons in faithful stewardship

Lydia teaches us one more lesson today for our faith and life. We learn it from the last part of our reading: "*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.*" Lydia was moved to action that day. She was moved to make an offer to the missionaries. She wanted them to stay at her home.

What a generous offer! She wanted to house these four men and provide for their needs while they did their missionary work in Philippi. This would cost her in resources and time to feed and house these men. Her home seems to have become the base of ministry in Philippi. At the end of this chapter, after Paul is jailed for his message, it says, "*After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left*" (16:40). Think of what a blessing this would have been to those traveling preachers!

The later history of this church at Philippi would be much the same. In the book of Philippians that Paul would write to this church over ten years later when he was imprisoned in Rome, he said, "*It was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.*"

They had financially and prayerfully supported Paul's work after he had moved on. And they had sent a church member, Epaphroditus, to personally care for Paul's needs in Rome! It would not surprise us if Lydia had a hand in that discussion to serve Paul, motivated by how her Savior Jesus had served her!

Here we see our third lesson from Lydia today. Hearts moved by grace are moved to action. They desire to become good stewards of opportunities

that God gives, and use blessings for God's kingdom.

How can you be a "Lydia" where God has put you? I'd imagine there are some of you here today that think, "I have done much service in the past. I helped build this building." Or "I served as a Sunday School teacher at one time." Or "I've held a church office!" But should we only look at the past? Do we only look in the rear view mirror or out ahead to our church's future?

Might some here be tempted to say, "Someone else will do it. Things just seem to get done around church and school," instead of "Here I am to serve"?

God can use you for direct service in our church's ministry!

- Music and choir
- VBS help
- Ushering
- Hosting an in-home Bible study group
- Serving on a committee
- Things related to our school
- Helping members who have a need
- And many more!

Are there things that you could help with in our building, which is a base of operation?

- Painting
- Maintenance
- Grounds work

Are there ways you can show your gratitude for God's amazing grace in your offerings?

- Generous giving and tithing
- Giving toward special projects and special needs

Are you a teen? There are ways you can contribute and serve! Are you a young adult? There are ways you can contribute and serve! Are you older and have contributed and served in the past? Since faith is a lifetime walk with the Lord, God gives opportunities until the end of life to serve and give back in a vast variety of ways!

So today, as we look at the life of Lydia in the book of Acts, let's associate ourselves with her. Let's put her shoes on and strive to assume the role she took in her church at Philippi. She has much to teach us:

- 1. Lessons in amazing grace**
- 2. Lessons in worshiping the Lord**
- 3. Lessons in faithful stewardship**

May God move us to faith and action as he did with Lydia! Amen.