



“Down to the River to Pray”
‘Jesus Saves’ Series
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We’re in the midst of a series of lessons in **the Book of Acts** we’ve entitled *Jesus Saves* showing how the early Church fulfilled Christ’s great commission to preach the gospel to the world and bring men and women to salvation in Christ Jesus. Our focus is on the detailed accounts we’re given in **Acts** of people’s conversions to Christ. How were they converted and thus, how are people converted today? What did the apostles preach and what did they tell people to do in answer to the question, *what must I do to be saved* when they had heard and learned of Jesus?

Today, we come to another pivotal moment in the explosive growth of the first century Church. We follow Paul and his company to the city of Philippi, where the gospel is preached for the very first time in Europe. Several years have passed since Paul’s dramatic conversion on the Damascus Road. He is now a devout follower of Christ and doing the work of an apostle. As an apostle sent to the Gentiles, he is now on his second missionary journey with Silas, Timothy, and Luke. The Holy Spirit will now dispatch them to the European continent where an open door for the gospel awaits and great things will happen. When all is said and done in **Acts 16**, one of the greatest Churches of all time will have been established—a Church that will be particularly dear to Paul for the rest of his earthly life and ministry.

Acts 16:6-15 “Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them. Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and the next day came to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony. And we were staying in that city for some

days. And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." So she persuaded us."

A small Sabbath prayer meeting on the riverside turns into much more than Lydia or those with her imagined. We want to study their conversions to Christ today. In particular, this case raises a question that we will address: what does it mean that *the Lord opened the heart of Lydia*? Does it imply some direct, inexplicable, miraculous operation of the Holy Spirit on her heart?

Some of the greatest people of faith are women, and that's always been the case, throughout the stream of time. God has used women in a mighty way in His purposes and plans, and this is no exception. In this case, He established one of the great Churches of all time on the faith of this godly and spiritually minded woman named Lydia. The Bible says that she was *a seller of purple*, and this tells us that she was a remarkable woman in the world of business and successful in her line of work. Purple dyes were costly in the ancient world and generally only the rich were able to afford clothes dyed in purple. Emperors and kings wore purple. She was from the city of Thyatira and had ended up in the Macedonian city of Philippi in her business venture.

But her success in the business world did not cause her to compromise or forget her virtues and her faith. That came first in her life and I believe that's evidenced by what the text tells us here in this story. She certainly believed in God, and now dwelling in a city filled mostly with heathen people, she was very careful to maintain her faith and her spiritual life. The Sabbath day meant nothing to the pagans of Philippi; it was just another day of business for them. But not with Lydia. As either a Jewess or a Jewish proselyte, she was very concerned with keeping the Jewish Sabbath. So, when that day came, she closed up shop and tended to the things of God instead. Normally a Jew would attend the synagogue on the Sabbath, but there would've been no synagogue in Philippi, so instead, the Bible says that she and some other women went down to the river to pray.

Once again, like those we've met in recent weeks in our journey through **the Book of Acts**, here is a person of virtue, morality, and even holiness who is in a lost condition. You see, those things didn't save Lydia. She needed—like everybody else—to hear and obey the gospel of Christ. Just like every person—religious or not, man or woman, rich or poor, moral or immoral—it doesn't matter: salvation is only found in the gospel of Jesus Christ and through obedience to it. This woman could not be saved until she heard, believed, and obeyed that gospel.

So, as before, God goes to work to providentially provide this sincere soul with the opportunity to hear the saving gospel. The apostle Paul is now well into his ministry and he's busy spreading the gospel. Since his conversion in **Acts 9**, he has been received by the Church and prepared by Christ for the ministry. He is now on his second missionary journey visiting the churches he planted along the way. He and Barnabas have gone their separate ways and he is now traveling with Silas and a young preacher in training named Timothy. Paul and Silas planned to preach as they traveled west from Galatia into Asia and Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit forbade them from doing so. That may seem strange that a preacher on a preaching mission is forbidden from preaching by God, but that's because God has His eye on what was going on in Philippi with this woman, Lydia, and He is concerned with getting Paul, the inspired apostle, to her to tell her about Jesus Christ. So, God the Holy Spirit intervenes and keeps Paul from

stopping in Asia, instead pointing him further west where he ends up in the seaside city of Troas. While at Troas, Luke (the author of **Acts**) joins Paul and his companions. While they're resting there for the night, a vision comes to Paul that we now know as 'the Macedonian call.'

The record says that in a vision, a man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with Paul to come over to Macedonia and help them; to cross over the sea and come to that new ground to preach the gospel to them. Paul readily perceived that this vision was from God and he did not delay in heading for Macedonia, concluding that God had called them there to preach the gospel to the people. Great things would happen when he and the others arrived, including finding this woman Lydia and her friends down by the river praying and ready to hear the gospel from Paul. So, they boarded a ship in Troas.

Acts 16:11-12 "Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and the next day came to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony. And we were staying in that city for some days."

Now, the providence of God is all over this. *We ran a straight course* means the wind was in their favor. Ancient ships, which relied on their sails, could only sail such a straight course if conditions were perfectly in their favor. Think about this: just as God counted off the footsteps of Philip on his way to that rural road where he found the Ethiopian eunuch, and just as God orchestrated the visions of Cornelius and Peter so that everything fell precisely into place to bring Peter to that Gentile household, so now the Lord of heaven and earth filled the sails of that ship with the exact wind it needed to sail right into that Macedonian port where Paul and company would eventually find their way into Philippi and into this Sabbath day prayer meeting where Lydia was gathered with her friends. Once again, God has seen to it that the inspired person makes contact with the uninspired person who is ready to hear the gospel and is a prime prospect for the kingdom of heaven. I believe that God will move heaven and earth even today to provide every sincere person with the opportunity to hear the truth and be saved. Every chance you get to hear and learn the truth of God from His word should be seized and treasured as a sacred and precious opportunity that should not be passed by or indifferently shrugged off or put off to some other time which may never come.

Normally, when Paul went into a new city, he would find a synagogue to go to on the Sabbath. That was his strategy because it was a good place to find people who were willing to discuss and listen to the scriptures. He would use that as a platform from which to preach the Christ of the scriptures. It was the beginning point of his work in that city, but apparently having no synagogue in Philippi, Paul does the next best thing. He somehow hears about a place out on the edge of town down by the river where people usually went to pray on the Sabbath. This is where he finds Lydia's prayer meeting in progress and finds a ready audience to share the gospel with.

Acts 16:13-14 "And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul."

This is an interesting phrase, *the Lord opened her heart*. How did the Lord open her heart? Some contend that this proves the Holy Spirit must perform a direct operation on the heart and mind of the sinner before that person can hear the gospel and be saved. The doctrine of Calvinism states that the unregenerate sinner is dead in sin and therefore cannot respond to the gospel. He is hereditarily depraved, born in sin and in such a condition that he can't even hear and understand the gospel until a

miraculous operation takes place in the heart of the one who is elected to salvation. That's what Calvinism suggests. But does this verse go to prove that?

The Bible says nothing here about the Holy Spirit performing such an operation on Lydia's heart. Notice it just says that *the Lord opened her heart to heed the things that were spoken by Paul*. Not that the Holy Spirit moved upon her in some operation of irresistible grace or a 'first work of grace' as it is called whereby she could understand and receive the word of God. We have to be very careful not to make the passage say more than it says. There is no question that the Holy Spirit must affect one's heart for salvation to take place. We're certainly not denying that fact. No person can be saved unless he is taught and led of the Holy Spirit to be saved. But what does that mean? How does the Holy Spirit play a role in one's salvation?

Let me ask a question: if I use a particular tool or means to accomplish something, can I still say that I accomplished that thing? What if I say that I took a key and opened a lock, did I or did the key open the lock? Well, I opened the lock by using the key. I didn't magically open the lock or perform some inexplicable operation on the lock to open it. I took the key, inserted it, turned it, and the lock opened. In so doing, I opened the lock by using the key.

Well, the gospel or the word of God is the instrument of the Holy Spirit. Paul once referred to it as *the sword of the Spirit*. The Holy Spirit revealed this word and He uses it to do His work in the conversion of sinners and even upon the hearts of Christians under sanctification. When the word does its work in the heart, it can rightly be said that the Holy Spirit did that same work, and it doesn't require some abstract, miraculous, and individual operation to do so. In fact, interestingly, everything the Bible says the Holy Spirit does upon the heart and mind of the sinner, the Bible also says of the word which the Holy Spirit revealed. That's very telling.

When Jesus promised His apostles that after His ascension back to heaven, He would send the Holy Spirit into their hearts to empower them to do the work of the apostles that He left for them to do, He said the Spirit would reveal the truth to them. That is, He would inspire them with the saving truth of the gospel so that they could perfectly preach it and write it down. And that by means of that truth, the Spirit would *convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment (John 16:8)*. How does the Holy Spirit do that? We learned from **Acts 2** that when Peter preached the resurrection of Christ for the first time on the Day of Pentecost, some three thousand people (who, in their ignorance and blindness of heart had crucified the Son of God only a few days before) now, when they heard the gospel preached, had this reaction:

Acts 2:37 "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

Peter told them how to obey the gospel and be saved, and they did what Peter told them to do. They now understood the gospel. Why? Because Peter had preached it to them. There is absolutely nothing said there about some mystical direct operation of the Holy Spirit on anyone's heart that day. They heard the truth, saw its credibility demonstrated by the apostles, and they had a change of heart, were convicted of their sins, and turned to Christ for salvation. The Spirit of God convicted them and taught them by means of the truth that He inspired Peter to preach that day.

The same is true of Lydia. When Paul sat down and began to explain the gospel to her, she came to realize that what she had believed to that point was incomplete and inadequate. She was like the other

Jews looking for an earthly Messiah to come and deliver Israel. But now, when Paul explains the truth and preaches Jesus to her, her heart is opened by the preaching of the gospel to act upon the things that Paul taught. The Lord, through his gospel message, opened her heart to the truth. She was not a godless heathen or immoral woman; she was a sincere woman who, at that point, did not understand that Christ was the promised Messiah until Paul preached what the Spirit revealed to mankind to be preached. When he preached that divine message, she could see that Jesus was the promised Messiah and Savior of the world. The Lord's gospel opened her heart so that she eagerly acted on what she heard, and she obeyed the gospel. It's as simple as that. It is the hearing of the word that creates faith; not a direct operation of the Spirit (**Romans 10:17**). It is the word revealed by the Spirit that leads to the saving of the soul (**James 1:21**), not some inexplicable moving of the Spirit or some Calvinistic first work of grace. The word, given by the Spirit, has that power. The Bible says we are *born of the Spirit* and it also says that we are *begotten by the word of God* which the Spirit revealed to the apostles to preach and write down (**I Peter 1:23**).

When Lydia heard the word of God preached to her, she was sincere enough to believe it and to allow the Spirit through that word to do His work in her heart and life and lead her to obedience to Christ wherein she was saved. Notice again that her heart was opened *to heed (or attend to {KJV}) the things spoken by Paul*.

Acts 16:14-15 "...The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." So she persuaded us."

What did Paul instruct her to do when he preached Christ to her? Doubtless she believed what Paul preached, but it goes further and says she attended to the things that Paul said. There was something involved in Paul's preaching that she attended to. This once again shows us, beyond the shadow of any doubt, that responding to the preaching of the gospel includes more than mere belief in the mind. That belief leads to an obedient step of that saving faith. Here, Luke tells us exactly what it is. She attended unto the things spoken by Paul by being baptized because that's a command of the gospel. Jesus gave it in the great commission.

Mark 16:15-16 "And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."

Every creature includes Lydia here in Philippi. Friend, baptism is not a church ordinance for new Christians. It is not an outward sign of an inward grace formerly received, as many suggest. Baptism is a step of obedience to the preaching of the gospel itself. Here, just as in every other case that we have learned about thus far in **the Book of Acts**, baptism is an immediate step enjoined upon every person who heard the gospel preached and believed it and wanted to turn to Christ in repentance and obedience. **The Book of Acts** doesn't separate baptism from hearing and obedience to the gospel; it makes baptism a part of obedience to the gospel. It makes it a part of the conversion of the sinner to Jesus Christ. And with that, this good woman and her family obeyed the gospel and they were saved. She attended to what Paul said and she was baptized.

Paul and Silas's work is not finished here in Philippi. Here we find a wealthy, pious, religious woman who learns the truth and becomes a Christian. That lays the foundation for this congregation that will be established in this city. Lord willing, next week we will meet a man of a different sort who also hears the

word and becomes part of this new and wonderful Church in Philippi. The overarching theme of the gospel is seen: that people of every nation, of every walk of life, man or woman, rich or poor, those of a devout background or a darker background, are all brought together in the gospel and made one in Christ Jesus. We will study the conversion of the Philippian jailer next week. This woman and her family and this jailer and his family will be the beginning of a wonderful Church that Paul will hold dear throughout the remainder of his life.

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