

“THE CONVERSION OF LYDIA.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Acts 16:11-15

Prayer: Holy Father, by your Holy Spirit open our hearts and minds to hear and receive your Word to us this morning. Remove the veil from our eyes, remove the hardness of our hearts, the lukewarmness of our wills, and show us new things from your Word. Don't let us leave the same way we came to worship this morning, in the name of Jesus and for His sake. Amen.

Introduction.

Two weeks ago we saw the sovereignty of God over sin in the heated conflict between Paul and Barnabas that caused them to go separate ways. God multiplied the spread of the Gospel.

Last week we saw the sovereignty of God over the decisions and direction of the apostles as they sought God's will for where they should go. God's purposeful providence closed doors and opened doors.

This morning we will see the sovereignty of God over human hearts and the salvation of sinners.

Everything in creation bends to the sovereign will of God. This is a call to rest in the sovereignty of God, to let it be our source of peace, contentment, joy, patience, of thanksgiving and worship.

Acts 16:11-12, to Macedonia and Philippi.

Why does the Bible trouble us with geography lessons?

One reason is because this is non-fiction, this is real, real places, real people. You can fact check all of this.

Second, it shows us how Jesus' command and promise in Acts 1 is being faithfully fulfilled. The Gospel is now spreading from Asia to Europe and we have the first recorded European convert.

This is ground breaking, the Gospel is crossing over into another people group. This is the Gospel breaking free from Jewish roots. Will it take root in different soil?

Paul landed on the shores of Europe and planted the flag of Christianity. Little did Rome know this foreign invasion would sweep across the Roman Empire and remains to this day while the Roman Empire is long gone. World history was forever being changed and rewritten.

This is one of those great *kiros* moments in human history, one of those turning point moments for which we all should thank God. This is the clear purposeful providence of God.

Third, it reminds us of the twists and turns and difficulties of life and of our Christian faith.

With all the doors closed to what was familiar, they now find themselves on a boat from Troas to the Greek island of Samothrace, and the next day they sail on to the northern Greek port city of Neapolis, and then walked ten miles to Philippi.

What faith and patience the work of the Lord takes, what perseverance and endurance. God is a God of slow beginnings, of humble beginnings, mustard seed beginnings.

Acts 16:13, the Sabbath prayer meeting by the river.

Philippi was the principle city of the area, the capital of Macedonia, a Roman colony named after Phillip II, the father of Alexander the Great. As a Roman colony it enjoyed special privileges like no taxes. People who worshiped non-Roman gods would have been uncomfortable here.

The mention of keeping Sabbath down by the river tells us there was no synagogue, there were not ten male Jews to have a quorum for establishing a synagogue. The mention of only women suggests that may not have been any male Jews in Philippi.

This must seem a very inauspicious beginning, humble, foolish even. With no synagogue, where do they start? They had to go outside of the town to an out of the way spot by a river where they found only a small group of women to talk to.

Acts 16:14-15, Lydia, the seller of purple goods from Thyatira.

God's ways are a mystery, He likes to mix things up. The first European convert was a wealthy businesswoman, a Gentile foreigner from Asia. Paul couldn't preach in Asia, but the first European convert was from Asia.

Providence brought her a long way from home to hear the Apostle Paul.

Providence brought Paul around Thyatira to come to Europe to meet a woman from Asia.

Lydia was like an importer of fine linen who specialized in expensive cloth treated with purple dye from Thyatira which is in Turkey. Thyatira was known for its linen industry, there was a guild of dyers there. Purple dye was especially expensive. She appears to be very wealthy, at the top of the social class, owning a home and having servants.

The Gospel knows no class or rank, it is for all people no matter their social status.

We are told Lydia was a worshiper of God, a God-fearer. Somehow she had abandoned the pantheon of gods available to her in her culture and become a monotheist, a worshiper of Yahweh and she adopted some of the ethical standards of the Jews.

Today we would say she was religious. Today people might even say she was a Christian. But she wasn't converted. She went to church and prayer meetings. She had the form of godliness without the power. You can look and act like a Christian without being one. It is not enough to be a God worshiper, there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ.

We are also told that being a God-worshiper was not reason she became a believer.

Why did she believe? She became a believer not by doing something, not by having faith, but by the grace of God changing her heart from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh.

Her heart was just as cold and dark and dead as every other human heart, just as rebellious and proud and sinful as every other pagan. The difference was God opened her heart.

Sometimes God uses extraordinary means, dramatic miracles, great deliverances. But God's ordinary means of ***regeneration*** is the quiet working of the Holy Spirit applying the truth of the Word of God to the hearts of the lost.

Regeneration is the sovereign, supernatural work of God the Holy Spirit giving the gift of spiritual life to dead sinners, raising them from the dead, granting them the ability to exercise faith so that they are now able to repent and trust in Christ. This is not a work to which man contributes but is a work of God alone. Regeneration is a resurrection from the dead.

Let me explain it using the illustration Jesus used to explain this to Nicodemus.

John 2:3-6 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Jesus says that being born again is like being born the first time. A baby takes no credit for being born. There is no DIY about it, it is not do-it-yourself, but done-for-you. Our new birth is God's doing. "A newborn is fearfully and wonderfully made, not discovered. A new birth is fearfully and wonderfully given, not achieved."

Just as an infant receives no credit for being born, we receive no glory from being regenerated by God. God removes our heart of stone and gives us a heart of flesh. It is not our faith that causes regeneration but regeneration causes our faith. Regeneration is the seed from which faith and repentance grow.

God opened her heart so she could hear Paul's words with faith and receive them and believe them. She would not have been able to understand any of the spiritual things he was saying without the Holy Spirit enabling her.

She wouldn't understand at first why her heart was strangely warmed to the truth, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus with Jesus as He opened the OT to them.

It was not Paul's message or words that saved her. The words were from Paul, but the Holy Spirit made the words powerful for salvation, to raise the dead to life.

This is a humbling thing to consider for us preachers of the Word of God. Your ability to understand and receive fruit and benefit and blessing from what I say doesn't depend on my education or intelligence or ability or skill or articulateness or even my good looks.

Your benefit and blessing depends on the work of the Holy Spirit. For that reason none of us should enter into worship or enter into hearing a sermon without specifically asking God to open our blind eyes and deaf ears and melt our cold hearts and enliven our weak wills. Do you sense the work of the Holy Spirit in your heart? If not ask, seek, knock.

Philippians 2:13 It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Philippians 1:6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Don't be afraid to share the Gospel, have confidence in the Gospel and in the Holy Spirit. Pray, share, leave the rest to God. Their salvation doesn't depend on you or how articulate you are or convincing. God's purposeful sovereignty will prevail.

Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

How do we know she believed? What was the chief mark of her conversion?

She was receptive to the Word of God, she believed with all her heart.

Again the baby illustration is helpful. Newborns eat, they eat all the time. They are insatiably hungry and thirsty. They are constantly growing.

Do you have an appetite for God's Word, for truth, for knowing Jesus, for spiritual milk?

Heart means what we care about, what we love, what we desire. When God changes our hearts, increasingly we care about, love, and desire the things of God and more importantly God Himself.

As the heart is opened to Jesus, the ear is open to His Word, the lips are opened to prayer, the hand is open to charity and hospitality, the feet are open to walk the paths of righteousness and obedience. It is life changing.

She took to heart the things Paul was saying. They had the ring of truth to her as never before.

A heart that has been opened by the grace of God is going to receive the Word as manna from heaven, rich food and drink, satisfying to the soul.

She desires to take the name of Jesus, to belong to Him in baptism, and all in our covenant household. She desired to know more and pressed for opportunities to grow in her understanding of Jesus and to spend more time with other Christians.

Is there a new work going on in your heart? Is the Spirit continuing to change you?

“Do you handle your money, your time, and your gifts differently? Is your speech becoming more godly? Are you more willing to forgive, to love an enemy, to push yourself out of your comfort zone? Are you changing how you relate to your spouse? Your roommate? Your parents? “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God (1 John 3:9)” (William Farley).

Is it so with you? Search your heart, answer honestly. Is it so with you?

Implications and application.

I want to conclude by drawing attention to one part of this story that has application for our situation today regarding the impact of Covid on our gathering for worship.

The Jews in Philippi were such a minority they didn't even have a synagogue. Furthermore, they were a despised religion in a Roman colony. When their normal means of worship were hindered, they found another way even if it was risky, dangerous or illegal to do so.

Why? Why do people around the world where gathering for worship is illegal or dangerous continue to do it? Why do they sneak out, why do they meet in secret locations, why do they gather in small groups and house churches? Why do they take risks to meet together?

There is a reason Christians all over the world take risks to gather with other Christians for worship. They know there is something important that happens when Christians gathered for worship and fellowship. They know there is something lost when they didn't.

The God-worshippers in Philippi valued keeping the Sabbath together. They met to encourage each other in the faith and in the worship of the one true living God. Worship for them was a priority even when it is inconvenient or dangerous.

There are some risks worth taking. We all weigh risks every day and perhaps now more than ever because of Covid. We are actually called to take risks for God without falling into the ditch of being foolish and reckless.

Of course there are those who cannot gather for corporate, public worship. Some are shut-in, some are confined to care facilities, some are sick or in the hospital, some have health conditions that make exposure to Covid too risky. These are providential hindrances.

The live stream option was only intended for those with a genuine health risk or concern.

If you are going to restaurants, if you are going to work every day and around other people, if you are gathering with friends in social situations, if you are doing those sorts of activities, but deciding to stay home to watch worship, you are doing something that is spiritual unhealthy for your soul and the soul of your family and the soul of your church family.

When we stay home for reasons of comfort or convenience or complacency or more time for ourselves we are turning our Christianity into something Jesus did not intend, something private, individualistic, personal, consumeristic. If you think what you are doing is OK spiritually, you are mistaken.

When God says not to forsake the gathering together of yourselves as some have fallen into the habit of doing, He doesn't say that to make us feel guilty, He says it because it is true, He cares for our souls and knows what is best for them. His ways and His commands are not onerous or burdensome, they are out of love for His children.

What I am saying is out of genuine pastoral concern for the health of your own soul and the health of our whole flock. We are a family, and just as it is not good for our own families to isolated, so it is not good for our church family. Ours is a family-faith, a corporate and communal faith, not an individualistic consumer faith, not something to be observed as a spectator rather than participated in together.

We come together to edify and encourage and build up one another. Just your presence has that effect. To not physically gather as the church hurts all of us spiritually.

If gathering here on Sunday morning is just too daunting for health reasons, then to consider one other possibility. Invite another person or family that is not gathering here on Sundays to join you, to create some sense of corporate worship. There are some of you who have done this or are doing this. I commend this practice to your prayerful consideration.

Everything God has done for us is gift, grace. And that is cause for worship. Let him who has ears to hear, hear what the Spirit is saying to the church this morning.

Prayer: Father, do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Change our hearts. There are some listening who desperately need you, need your Spirit to stir, need your Spirit to wake up, need your Spirit to remove hindrances, barriers to Gospel, lies of Satan. There are some who have not known or experienced the regenerating power of your Holy Spirit. Come, open their hearts, overcome their resistance and rebellion for the sake of their eternal souls. Others are feeling dry, complacent, like you are distant, come and revive and renew with a fresh wind of your Spirit. Give a new hunger and thirst, a new longing and desire.