

LYDIA AND HER HOUSE

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W. H. Bergherm relates a remarkable story of when he was in Australia early in World War II. One small body of men found themselves one day entirely surrounded by enemy forces. One man had opened his Bible to a certain text that they had accepted as the voice of God to them.

Four Australian infantrymen were completely cut off from the rest of their company and surrounded by a large enemy force. Escape was impossible, and death or imprisonment seemed almost certain. One man had suffered a bullet wound in the head, another was wounded in the chest, and a third carried an ugly wound in the hand. Hidden within hearing of the enemy, they ate their last rations, destroyed their mail and personal belongings, and prepared for what to them seemed the inevitable.

Then it was that one of the men thought of God and the Bible he always carried with him. Before opening the Book, he sent forth a prayer from the heart. He asked for guidance, and immediately his eyes fell on a text in Acts 16:13—"On the Sabbath we went out of the city by a riverside." He mentioned the matter to the other men. There was a river nearby. Could it be that they ought to try it? They decided to take this verse so divinely sent to them as a message straight from God. They crept out along the river. At times they were almost within arm's reach of enemy troops. Yet they stealthily crept on.

Three days later, with food gone and strength exhausted, they decided they could go on no farther when two of the men had identical dreams. They both saw one of their buddies coming toward them and leading them back to their unit. They awakened with the deep impression that if they kept going a little farther, they would surely meet this man. It gave them fresh courage and in that courage they pressed on for eight days more, suffering incredible hardships. But they knew they would make it. On the eighth day they heard chopping strokes nearby in the jungle. They cautiously crawled toward the sound of the chopping and fell exhausted before the feet of the very man both had seen in their dreams. Was this a coincidence? Ask them. They believed it was nothing but the hand of God leading them. Left to themselves they could never have made that journey to freedom.

As Paul sets out on his second missionary journey from his home base sponsoring church in Antioch, he chooses Silas as his fellow worker. On his travels westward across southern Turkey, he finds a firm believer in Timothy at Lystra. As they progress to Phrygia and Galatia, praying for open doors and ready hearts they “were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia.” Acts 16:6. You have probably had a similar experience. Despite your best attempts to step out in faith and make headway for the Lord, the doors close.

Undaunted, they marched on to Bithynia. Again, without explanation, the door closed there as well. Notable on this occasion is the Spirit’s initially negative guidance, twice blocking the party’s plans to evangelize certain areas in Asia Minor. While no one can hinder God’s purpose in mission, God can and does frustrate others’ schemes. No explanation is given for the closed doors other than the sovereign will of the Spirit of Jesus. Man’s disappointments are often God’s appointments! And when God closes one door he opens another.

There is an abiding sense of Jesus’ involvement with his ambassadors. Paul is certainly no stranger to sudden changes in itinerary, as attested by his revolutionary experience on the Damascus road. Now, even after his conversion, he continues to take wrong paths which the Lord must redirect. The journey remains both a challenge and an adventure with unexpected twists and turns.

Skirting the forbidden zones, Paul and company arrive at the Aegean port of Troas. Four doors had closed to them along the way. Paul’s uncertainty about where to head next is overcome by a clear vision. Amidst the lure of the sounds and smells of the sea, a strange and most remarkable event was bestowed upon Paul by the Holy Spirit who had been forbidding and preventing them along the way. “And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; there stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us.” Acts 16:9. This was not a psychological episode occurring in Paul’s mystical brain. It was an external, independent, revelation event. This nocturnal vision came from God.

It is neither a Greek nor a Roman who appears in the vision, but Paul sees a certain Macedonian man, standing. Although the aura of divine authority surrounds this epiphany, the vision itself features an unmistakably human figure—a Macedonian male—requesting aid, not an angel or the Lord himself mandating ministry. This

phenomenon highlights the importance of human receptivity to the gospel in charting the church's mission. Despite its expansionist goals and dynamic backing from the sovereign Lord of all, the church is not an imperial juggernaut steam-rolling its way to the ends of the earth. Christian missionaries seek out those who most welcome their work; when they are not welcome they shake the dust from their feet and move on. By going only where invited, answering pleas for help, Christian messengers can scarcely be regarded as threats to the empire.

The Macedonian man compels them to cross the straits and step foot on European soil. This is a bold new move into hitherto unentered territory so far as the gospel proclamation is concerned. Paul's vision initiates the founding of the Christian community in Macedonia. Paul is about to set out on a ground-breaking mission, and that receives its instigation, and confirmation, by means of the vision.

There are times when God has used visions to connect his ambassadors with the heathen. A native chief had an extraordinary dream in which he saw a white man coming to his people with the big black book and four red books. He took this as a sign that the gods were favorable toward his people.

When a missionary came to their village he told them he was going to teach them about the true God. The chief asked him, "Do you come with the big black book and the four red books?" The missionary said, "No." "Then you must pass on," replied the chieftain.

One day a white missionary came to them and again the chief applied the test which had been revealed to him in a dream. "Are you the messenger with the big black book and the six red books?" "Yes," replied the Seventh-day Adventist missionary. "I come to you with God's Holy Bible and the four red books of the *Testimonies for the Church* by Ellen G. White." The chief and his people welcomed the messenger as being the one shown to him by God in his dream.

The visionary apostle Paul wasted no time in obeying God's directive. New places did not frighten him. The unknown excited him. There was no wrestling with the details. No weak excuses like, "Oh, Lord, I get seasick when I have to sail that far!" Or, "Oh, Lord, that's too far from home. I'm not sure we have the funds." No sooner had the missionaries been beckoned to "Come" than they left immediately.

David Brainerd, won many thousands of American Indians to Christ. He said, "I cared not where or how I lived, or what hardships I went thru, so that I could but gain souls for Christ. While I was asleep I dreamed of these things, and when I awoke, it was the first thought that I had, the thought of this great work." He caught the vision, he heard the Indians crying, "come over here and help us!"

David Livingston, the first man to take the gospel into the heart of Africa, said, "I must open a way to the interior or perish!" It was do or die. He caught the vision, and he heard the Africans crying, "Come over here and help us!"

"And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavored to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called *us* for to preach the gospel unto them." Acts 16:10. Dr. Luke, the writer of Acts, joined company with Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Luke gave up his practice of medicine to join ranks with these missionaries on the move. "And from thence to Philippi, which is the chief city of that part of Macedonia, and a colony: and we were in that city abiding certain days." Acts 16:12. In his previous expedition, Paul typically began his work in a new city by preaching in the local synagogue on the Sabbath day. The ancient metropolis of Philippi was not a hub of Judaism. Therefore, when Paul sought out his usual venue for preaching at the synagogue, he came up short. Paul sojourns in the city for a few days and then inaugurates his Sabbath mission "outside the gate by the river" with a group of female God-fearers.

When the Sabbath came, they found the place where a group of devout Jews and God-fearers met for worship and joined them. "And on the Sabbath we went out of the city by a river side." Acts 16:13. Here we have the Sabbath mentioned incidentally as a well-known institution. And this is in the New Testament, in the book of Acts, which was written A. D. 60, or nearly thirty years after the resurrection. The simple reading of this record can lead only to the conclusion that there was something very distinctive about the Sabbath day in the religious life of Paul. And why not? Paul is the one who declared to the New Testament church that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine and instruction. He knew what all the Scriptures had to say about the seventh-day Sabbath; he knew the command in the ten commandments to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. It was therefore most natural that while he was abiding certain days in Philippi, he would single out the Sabbath day as the

particular time when he would seek to secure a spiritual blessing in fellowship with others who were engaging in religious services.

Here was no synagogue; here was simply a quiet spot where “prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted thither.” Acts 16:13. This little prayer group had asked for guidance, and Paul had been sent to them for a great purpose, because they were receptive to the truth. Though small in number, they were strong in the Spirit of God.

Paul and Silas sat down and spoke to the women gathered there. Luke assumes that Paul’s addressing of the women is a quite normal phenomenon—in contradistinction to the normal scholarly standard, which forbade a sage or disciple to converse with a woman in the street. He was open to initiating contacts with, rather than excluding women from his proclamation of the good news.

The outstanding woman among them was this businesswoman—“a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.” Acts 16:14. Though a native of Thyatira of western Asia Minor, Lydia now conducted her business at Philippi, a city of eastern Macedonia on the great east-west Via Egnatia Highway between Rome and Asia. You can almost hear the tramp of the Roman legions, with the infantry on foot and the cavalry complement on prancing horses, as they made their way along a highway that led probably past Lydia’s house and through the Pangaeian mountain range. It was to these mountains that Lydia and other women met on the river bank of the Gangites which offered peace and quiet away from the populous city.

Lydia was evidently a woman of determination, foresight, and generosity and had a personal charm that drew people to her. We can imagine her as a radiant woman with brunet coloring. Perhaps she wore purple well herself and dressed in it often as she made her way through the streets of Philippi. Lydia comes from a region known for the production of dyed wool and woolen clothing. The textile industry became very prosperous especially in places where fine dyes were found. The most coveted color was purple, which was extracted from the glands of a certain shellfish.

Lydia moved within an industry and a commercial enterprise which had a strong base in the economy of the day. Purple materials were a markedly luxury item for rich people. Lydia would have been wealthy herself. She put up the “Closed” sign on her shop window every

Sabbath day and went to worship with fellow believers. You would do well to believe God's blessed Sabbath day and cease your labors on His day in order to come to worship and welcome His presence.

She and the other women must have been startled to see four strange men appear there by the banks of the river. But their souls were thirsting for God and they saw in the faces of these men a new light. She was a Gentile who was a God-fearer. She was one of those Gentiles who accepted the monotheism of Judaism but observed only the most basic regulations. She believed in the God of creation who rested on the seventh day Sabbath from all His work.

They "heard us." Lydia was one who heard Paul's explanation of the way of Jesus the Nazarene over a period of time. They listened to Paul as he related his story of the gospel of Jesus Christ. She learned that He was the great second person of the Godhead through whom the Father had made all things. Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath day.

Evangelist Larry Lasiter relates meeting a Disciples of Christ minister, Robert, in Uganda, and have sweet fellowship discussing the gospel. Suddenly, Robert declared, "You keep Sabbath, and we keep Sunday."

I turned to my new friend and said, "Robert I'm sorry, but that is not really correct. We do keep the Sabbath, but you and your congregation do not keep any day."

I then told him that when I had walked to the outdoor market on Sunday morning I found only a few stands open for business. Then at about 1 p.m. I began to see many people walking from their churches, coming to open their stands for business.

So I said, "Most of the people that I know who attend a Sunday church do not keep any day holy to the Lord. They merely attend morning services and then do whatever secular activities they want the rest of the day."

I then asked brother Robert if members of his congregation practiced what I had seen at the market. He put his head down onto a table top and said disappointedly, "yes."

I then told him that Sabbath keeping is more than a day to attend worship services. And that the fourth Commandment stated not only to "Remember" the Sabbath, but to also "Keep it holy." That it is a 24 hour period of time that the Lord made for man to leave his secular works, man needs this rest. I explained that the Sabbath is a divinely appointed time, sanctified and set apart by God for the holy use of

assembly, fellowship, prayer, study and various acts of doing good to others. And I told him how grateful I was that my Heavenly Father loves me so much that He has given me a weekly appointment to meet with Him.

I then said, "Brother, God is always available for His children, but isn't it a meaningful thing that He made one whole 24 hour day 'holy' and 'sanctified' just for He and us? God promises to be there when the saints assemble."

Pastor Robert had told his congregation that he was convicted to observe the Sabbath day. After explaining this doctrine to the church over a few weeks, the Disciples of Christ began to hold services on the Sabbath and the congregation began to experience the joy of having a full 24 hour time period devoted fully to the spiritual things of the Lord.

After holding 34 crusades in 34 days my daughters Sarah, 23, and Jennifer, 21 and I returned home to America. Soon I received a letter from Robert saying how much a blessing they have found Sabbath observance to be. He also told me that he had visited a church in Uganda and shared the Sabbath blessing with them. After much study and testimony this congregation also eagerly embraced this gift and entered into the Lord's weekly rest.

As Lydia listened, the Lord opened her heart and "she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul." Clearly salvation is the work of the Lord, for He saves people. Salvation originates with God. The Lord opened Lydia's heart to have her pay close attention to the words Paul was speaking. God granted Lydia a receptive heart to understand spiritual things. He gave her the gift of faith and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. The heart is in itself closed, but it is the prerogative of God to open it.

God brought the preachers to Philippi right at the proper time instead of permitting them to go into Asia or Bithynia. There may even have been circumstances in her life which in the providence of God made her more receptive at this time than she might have been at other times. And there was the convicting work of the Spirit as the preachers presented the gospel. She now understood that the same Lord Jesus Christ who created all things also died for the sins of the world. The Lord of the Sabbath day is both Creator and Saviour from sin.

All the missionaries had been involved in the teaching as the weeks passed, but it was to one of Paul's messages that Lydia finally

responded. Prospects were always directed to believe the gospel, to repent of their sins, and to be immersed for the forgiveness of their sins. Baptism was one of the things the missionaries spoke about.

What a fervency of spirit, what deep humility, what keen foresight, what indomitable courage for Lydia to step forward and accept the gospel.

Soon afterward she was baptized and then her household was baptized. "And when she was baptized, and her household." Acts 16:15. She made her decision to be a true Christian without hesitation. She did not think of how it might affect her business if she accepted this new faith. Her customers of the purple cloth or dye would probably have scoffed at the gospel of Jesus Christ, but Lydia did not wait to see. She put Christ first, and business afterward, and went forward and was baptized, as were members of her household.

Baptism is that by which we become Christ's, and heirs according to the promise. It is that by which we get into Christ, who is the Door of salvation. We read, "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." Gal. 3:27. Thus we are taught that being baptized into his body is being joined to his church, for the church is the body of Christ. See Eph. 1:22, 23; Col. 1:18. And since it is by his Spirit that this union is effected, it is evident that baptism is something more than a mere form, and that only those are members of the true church of Christ who have the Spirit of Christ.

At what stage in the ministry of Christ do we become united to him? "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." Rom. 6:3, 4

The death of Christ, then, is that by which we become united to Him. Baptism signifies the death and resurrection of Christ. But it signifies more than a simple recognition of that fact. It signifies our acceptance of that sacrifice, and that we actually share His death and resurrection. If we ever are glorified with Christ, we must suffer with him. Rom. 8:17. We must share the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable to His death, and must also know the power of His resurrection. Phil. 3:10.

In becoming Christ's we take His life in exchange for ours? It is not simply that Christ gave His life to purchase us, but that He gives His life *to us*; our life has been forfeited, and we are virtually dead,—dead

in trespasses and sins, and He gives His life to us that we may actually have life. Henceforth, then, it is to be the life of Christ that meets the temptations of Satan, and labors to do the Father's will. But Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever; therefore the life which is given to us will present the same characteristics that the life of Christ presented when He was on the earth in person; His life in us must be as strong to do and to resist as it was when He lived in Judea.

Spotlighting the response of one woman, Lydia, provides an interesting counterpoint not only to the man in the Troas vision but also to Cornelius. Like Cornelius, Lydia is "a worshipper of God," devoted to prayer, who eagerly accepts the gospel through faith and baptism, leads her household to follow suit, and entertains missionaries in her home. As Cornelius was the first Roman-Gentile convert in Acts, so Lydia is the first European convert. As household head and trader in expensive purple textiles, she also parallels the Caesarean centurion as a person of some wealth and influence. Moreover, she recalls other single, independent women of means in Acts, such as Tabitha and Mary (Mark's mother), whose homes become bases for Christian communities.

As a handler of purple goods who likely lives and works as well as worships outside the city gate, Lydia would seem to fit among the lower, despised classes of Philippian society, whatever her financial standing. Her marginal status seems to be of no concern to Paul. He appears as comfortable in the riverside home of Lydia the purple-dyer as Peter was in the seaside residence of Simon the tanner, a similarly scorned profession.

Regardless of her lowly professional rank, Lydia holds an honored place in Acts as host to the developing community of disciples, which includes men as well as women. It suggests Lydia's leadership role within the local house-church.

It appears that she several times invited the missionaries to stay in her home while they were working in Philippi, and that they several times refused. "She besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us." Acts 16:15. Finally she said, "If my faith was sufficient to be baptized on, why is it not good enough for me to be your hostess?" And when she said this, there was nothing more that Paul could do to object, and so they went to Lydia's home to stay.

It was rare for Paul to accept aid from his converts while he was still in their town (Acts 20:33; 2 Cor. 12:17). He didn't want any of his opponents to be able to say that he was just preaching because of the money it made for him. Up to this time the missionaries must have been providing their own lodging. Now Lydia will take care of these expenses. This house church provided a social network of protection for the missionaries. There they received material support, legal aid, hospitality, opportunities for employment and trade, and places for assembly. Ever after this, the Philippian church keeps sending missionary offerings to help Paul in his evangelistic work; and we do not doubt that Lydia was one of the generous contributors to these offerings (Phil. 4:2, 3, 15).

Women certainly brought to the evangelization of the Roman colony of Philippi essential assets which helped Christianity gain a foothold. Lydia, as a representative of the merchant class, had economic resources and the status that went with it. Her house became the center of teaching and evangelism in that city. She was a patroness to Paul. It is possible that through her influence the Philippians church supplied Paul with financial assistance over the course of several years as he took the gospel throughout the Greco-Roman world. Like Lydia, the distinguished ministries of Euodia and Syntyche were very important to the Philippian church. As fellow workers with Paul, they had shared in the evangelization of the pagan community.

Women in the earlier Philippian church had equal status with the males in spreading the gospel. No barrier prevented them from teaching and evangelizing the pagan population of Philippi, both male and female.

Two Adventist women were visiting the people in their neighborhood one day. They approached one home and pressed the doorbell. An angry woman shouted, "What do you want?"

"We are visiting our neighbors and were hoping to find someone home. We have some helpful literature that you might be interested in. May we come in and pray with you?"

They were invited inside. There they found another woman sitting on the floor. Lying beside her were several large bottles of medicine, all opened. The visitors soon discovered that these two women had planned to commit suicide. As the visitors talked to the two women, they shared their faith in Christ and encouraged the women to give God their troubles.

“Now I understand,” the once-angry woman told them. “It was not you who rang my doorbell; it was God. He sent you here. He rang the doorbell just as the moment when we were preparing to end our lives. Thank you for coming at this moment. We are interested in your literature, and we need your prayers. Please pray for us.”

The visitors prayed with their new friends and assured them that no problem was too great for God. When the Adventist women left that home, they left two women whose hearts were now rejoicing in God’s perfect timing.