

LYDIA AND THE WAY THAT GOD DOES GOOD THINGS
ACTS 16:11-15

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The news media has a natural tendency to focus on the bad things going on in our world, and indeed there are bad things happening around us. There have been many shootings in our country in recent days: Charlie Kirk, the church in Michigan last Sunday, the Catholic church in Minneapolis a couple of weeks earlier. There are natural disasters like hurricanes in the Bahamas and Bermuda. There is the political polarization in Washington and the partial shutdown of the federal government. Riots in Portland and shootings in Chicago. There is the war in Ukraine and the fighting in Gaza.

But there are good things happening in our world. There are signs of spiritual interest among college students, partly as a result of the Charlie Kirk assassination. There are stories of rescue from the hurricanes and earthquakes. There were beautiful stories that little kids shared in the White House this week about how they had overcome cancer.

In our better moments, when we are not just trying to survive and pay the bills and take care of our health issues and do our jobs, most of us would like to make some kind of positive contribution to our world. Being, for the most part, Christian people, we recognize that this involves a connection with God and with Jesus.

The passage before us this morning describes how God does do good things, especially of a spiritual nature. We are going to look at the way in which He accomplishes His purposes and consider how His dealings with an obscure businesswoman offer principles that have value to all of us in the situations in which we find ourselves. There is hope that He can use us to do good things in our own little corner of the world.

I.

First of all, in vv. 11-13 of Acts 16, we are going to see how GOD USES INSIGNIFICANT SURROUNDINGS TO DO GOOD THINGS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. GOD USES INSIGNIFICANT SURROUNDINGS...) In our study of the Book of Acts we have seen that Paul and Barnabas completed their first missionary trip to Cyprus and Asia Minor. As they were about to embark on their second trip, they had an argument over whether they should bring John Mark along with them. As a result, they split up into two missionary teams. (SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY) Barnabas brought his cousin John Mark along with him as they headed back to Cyprus. Paul brought a Jewish guy named Silas from Jerusalem with him as they headed overland to revisit the churches which had been established earlier in Asia Minor, especially in the Roman province of Galatia.

After visiting Derbe and Lystra and Iconium and Pisidian Antioch, they headed west with the intention of establishing new churches in the rest of Asia Minor. For reasons unstated the Holy Spirit prevented them from setting up an evangelism outreach in the Roman province of Asia. So they headed north to Bithynia. But the Lord prevented them from preaching there also. Finally Paul had a vision in which a Macedonian man called him to come over to Greece and preach the gospel there. So in v. 11 we pick up the story as the missionary team leaves Troas.

Verse 11 says, **“So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis...”** (NEAPOLIS MAP) They went past the island of Samothrace and then on to Neapolis, which was the port city for Philippi, ten miles inland. This was a distance of 156 miles, which they apparently covered in two days. They must have enjoyed a strong wind from the east. The Lord seems to have wanted the missionaries in Philippi in time for a divinely arranged appointment.

Notice that in v. 11 the author Luke uses the plural pronoun “we.” He began using that term to include himself in the events described for the first time in the book in v. 10 when the missionaries were in Troas. It would seem that Luke joined the missionary team at that point and remained with Paul and Silas for a while. What we have at this point, then, is an eyewitness account of the events that happened as opposed to much of the rest of the Book of Acts which deals with events that Luke learned about from other sources.

In v. 12 then Luke says that they arrived at **“Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days.”** (PHILIPPI) Philippi was named after Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great. It was located on a fertile plain. There were also gold mines located nearby. Its location on the key route called the Egnatian Way, which connected the Aegean and Adriatic Sea, added to its importance. Then also there was a famous medical school here.

Some scholars have suggested that Luke was from Philippi and that he attended the medical college here. He calls Philippi “a leading city of Macedonia.” It was not the capital of the province, and it was not even the capital of the Roman district in this province. It was a Roman colony. Then also Luke devotes more space to the incidents that took place here than he does to the incidents in any of the other towns the missionaries visited on their second and third journeys, with the exception of Ephesus, where they stayed for two years. Perhaps Luke is revealing hometown devotion by his detailed description of their stay here.

When Julius Caesar died in 44 BC, his adopted son Octavian joined with Mark Antony in opposing Brutus and Cassius. (BATTLE OF PHILIPPI) At Philippi in 42 BC Antony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius.

Eleven years later, in 31 BC, Octavian opposed Mark Antony, who was assisted by his lover Cleopatra of Egypt. In a crucial sea battle at Actium (ACTIUM) Antony’s fleet was defeated. Antony and Cleopatra fled to Alexandria where they both committed suicide.

Octavian became Caesar Augustus, who was governing the empire when a famous baby was born in Bethlehem. (PROJECTOR OFF)

After the decisive Battle of Actium many of the Roman army veterans were settled in Philippi. The city was made a Roman colony, which gave it special privileges. It was accountable directly to Rome and not to the provincial government. Its residents did not have to pay provincial taxes. Roman law applied to the city. Its government was modeled after that of the city of Rome. The residents of the city were made Roman citizens. That was a source of special pride to the Philippians. That background lends significance to the statement of Paul in his letter (PROJECTOR ON--- PHILIPPIANS 3:20) to the Philippian Christians: **“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ ...”** Archaeologists have discovered further attachment to the city of Rome in that eighty percent of the inscriptions which they have found from this era are in Latin, not Greek.

Verse 13 tells what happened when the missionaries got to Philippi (PROJECTOR OFF): **“And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together.”** Philippi seems not to have had a synagogue. Jewish law specified that ten Jewish men were required to establish a synagogue. Without a synagogue worshippers of the God of Israel were expected to meet on the Sabbath under the open sky and near a river or the sea. They would recite certain prayers, read from the Law and the Prophets, and discuss what was read.

A couple of streams passed by the city. Paul and his companions found a small group of worshippers gathered by one of them. Keep in mind that Paul and Silas had passed up other opportunities to preach in Asia Minor. They had passed by cities with significant Jewish populations and large synagogues that would have provided large audiences for the gospel. For some reason the Lord had not allowed them to stop at any of these places. Finally they were directed to Philippi. When they go to make their first presentation of the gospel in the city, do they find a huge audience waiting to hear them? No. They find a small group of women. Talk about a small church--- they maybe did not even have a building.

The text doesn't give any indication that they were upset by this or greatly disappointed. But I wonder if the thought of opportunities passed over involving greater numbers of people did not at least go through their minds.

In American church history it has generally been the case that women have been the dominant sex by number in churches and other Christian organizations. But since the pandemic pollster George Barna has discovered that 45% of American men claim that they attend church regularly while only 36% of women make the same claim. This is a fascinating change.

In spite of the seemingly insignificant surroundings in Philippi a significant work of God was begun here. A large congregation would eventually be formed. The Christians in

this community would become the recipients of a letter that would be included in the canon of the New Testament.

This is the way that God often does good things. He chooses insignificant surroundings to accomplish great things. He chooses a small hamlet of shepherds to be the birthplace of the Savior. He chooses a manger as the specific place of His birth. He picks a small, muddy river as the place where the Messiah would be baptized. He picks a leaky ship called the Mayflower to bring a group of religious rebels and rejects across the Atlantic to be the ones who first bring the gospel to New England. As I described a several Sundays ago, He chose a haystack in Massachusetts as the place where the American missionary movement took root. Who knows what good things the Lord might have in mind for a small congregation in a small community which sometimes meets in a parking lot in Nevada that is available for service?

II.

Consider also that God not only uses insignificant surroundings to do good things, GOD USES INSIGNIFICANT PEOPLE TO DO GOOD THINGS (PROJECTOR ON--- II. GOD USES INSIGNIFICANT...) --- insignificant, that is, in terms of what our society tends to regard as significant. I find that principle coming out of the first part of v. 14. There Luke writes, **“One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God.”**

Lydia, a woman, became the key person in the establishment of a church in this city. Now we must note that Lydia was not some poor, uneducated peasant woman. She was a businesswoman, a seller of purple fabrics who came originally from Thyatira in the Roman province of Asia. Paul had wanted to go to this province and had been prevented. Instead the Lord had brought an Asian to Paul in Macedonia.

Macedonian women had a reputation for independence. In Roman law, to which Philippi was subject, a freeborn woman with three or more children or a woman freed from slavery with four or more children was entitled to exercise legal privileges on her own, including the transaction of legal business. Other women had to exercise such rights through men. Perhaps Lydia had such an independent status.

(THYATIRA MAP) Thyatira, the hometown of Lydia, was known for the production of purple fabric. The making of purple fabric was an industry that continued into the 1800s in Thyatira. Some of the purple dye came from the root of the madder plant. (MADDER PLANT) The really expensive purple fabric was made with a liquid which came from the murex snail. (MUREX SHELLS)

Lydia was a business woman somehow involved in this trade. Her success was evident in that she had a house that was able to accommodate three additional guests. Probably she had servants. The lack of mention of a husband would imply that she was either single or a widow. (PROJECTOR OFF)

But even with her business success she was still a woman. In the writings of the rabbis the statement was made: **“May the word of the Torah be burned and not delivered to women.”** (Jerusalem Talmud, Sotah 3:4) Lydia was not only a woman; she was also a Gentile. Perhaps in Thyatira she had become attracted to the God of Israel. Through her involvement with the synagogue she probably learned about God from the Hebrew Bible. Then she became a worshipper of Him.

But not only was Lydia a woman and a Gentile; she was also a foreigner, an immigrant. Maybe she didn't even have a green card. People who are immigrants often encounter prejudice in an adopted country. Foreigners who experience success, like Lydia did in business, at times face even greater prejudice. “Where do these foreigners get off coming to my country and doing better than I am?”

So Lydia was a success as a businesswoman. But in terms of how she was viewed by Macedonian society, she was still only a woman. She was also a foreigner. From the contemporary Jewish perspective her gender and her ethnic background as a Gentile were liabilities in terms of expecting God to do anything of great significance with her.

Yet the Lord is inclined to use seemingly insignificant people--- people whom society doesn't regard with a whole lot of respect--- to accomplish things that are important to Him. For Lydia seemingly became the key person to the missionaries and to the Lord in establishing a church in Philippi. She provided Paul and Silas and Luke with a place to stay and food to eat. Probably she was influential in encouraging the members of her household to trust Christ. Perhaps through her business contacts she provided other ways for the city of Philippi to be evangelized.

God uses seemingly insignificant people to do great things for Him. (PROJECTOR ON-- DEUTERONOMY 7:7) In Deuteronomy #7 v. 7 Moses told the Chosen People, **“It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples...”** Who would have expected that a slave and an inmate would become the second in command in the most powerful country on earth? But that is who God arranged to be prime minister in Egypt as Joseph became the right hand man for the pharaoh. And who would have guessed that a shepherd boy, the youngest son in the family, would become the greatest king of Israel? Yet that is what the Lord did with David. And who would have guessed that God would choose a young carpenter and a poor teen age girl from an out-of-the-way village to be the parents of the Messiah? But God chose Joseph and Mary for this honor.

Still today the Lord is prone to use seemingly insignificant people to accomplish His purposes--- people like you and me. (1 CORINTHIANS 1:26) In 1 Corinthians #1 vv. 26-29 the Apostle Paul writes, **“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. (1 CORINTHIANS 1:27) But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; (1 CORINTHIANS 1:28) God chose what is low and despised in the world,**

even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, (1 CORINTHIANS 1:29) so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”

I got a note recently from friends in New Hampshire who were wondering how we were doing with the loss of Suzy. They have ten kids. (PROJECTOR OFF) They came from a Catholic background. When their oldest was about six or seven, we had some influence on their decision to send him to a Christian school. The mom told us that one morning the young son told his mom before school that he wanted to make sure that she understood how to go to heaven. He explained the gospel and told his mom to pray a prayer with him. She said that she did and that she had invited Jesus into her life. Such is what a little boy can do.

God uses insignificant people to do good things. The Lord can use us in significant ways if we will be faithful to Him.

III.

Then also it is important to understand that GOD CHANGES THE HEARTS OF INDIVIDUALS TO DO GOOD THINGS. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. GOD CHANGES THE HEARTS OF...) That is evident in the second part of v. 14 and v. 15. It is not because we have wonderful surroundings and great educations and positions of power that God uses us to do great things. It is not because we are important people that God uses us. And it is not because we are deserving or wise or good people that God even saves us and gives us eternal life. Thus we read in the second part of v. 14, **“The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”**

Good things, including our own individual salvation, ultimately have their origin with God. A relationship with Jesus is necessary to be right with God. (JOHN 6:44) But Jesus said in John 6:44, **“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.”**

Luke also recognized this truth. Back in #13 v. 48 he was talking about the response of the people to the gospel in the city of Iconium in Asia Minor. (PROJECTOR OFF) He wrote, **“And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”** Luke acknowledges a spiritual truth that it is God who does the appointing. Now we are told that it was the Lord who opened Lydia’s heart.

The Lord had arranged this whole situation. The missionaries had wanted to preach in the provinces of Asia and Bithynia, but both times the Lord indicated somehow through the Holy Spirit that it was not to be. Then Paul had a divine vision in which a Macedonian called him to come over to this region of Greece. Then when Paul and Silas and Luke showed up at the place of prayer, they discovered a small, but receptive, audience.

Although the text does not specifically indicate it, the Lord had also been at work on Lydia. He had attracted her to faith in the God of Israel. He had sovereignly brought her from Thyatira to Philippi. Now v. 14 says that He opened her heart to believe.

Notice that there was a process involved in Lydia's spiritual experience. Verse 14 says that she already was a worshiper of God. Having been created in the image of God, she, like many others, had an interest in knowing her Creator. Somehow she got connected to a synagogue in Thyatira. There she prayed and sang praises to God. She learned something about the Hebrew Scriptures. Perhaps she memorized portions of the Bible. But these things did not make her right with God. They did not produce eternal life in her. Many church goers and synagogue goers today also lack this eternal life because there is something that is still missing.

After becoming a worshiper of God, the second step in Lydia's spiritual journey was hearing the gospel. Verse 14 in our passage says that Paul was speaking and that Lydia was listening. Paul was talking about Jesus being the Messiah of Israel. He probably followed his usual pattern of showing how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies made in the Hebrew Bible concerning the Messiah. He no doubt spoke of the facts about His life and death and resurrection and ascension. He told her and the other women that Jesus died to pay the penalty for the sins of all human beings. He said that she could experience forgiveness of sins and eternal life by trusting in Jesus as her Savior.

The problem today is that a lot of people who go to church don't really understand the gospel. They need someone to explain it to them. They are like I was as a young person. I grew up going to church, and I thought that I was a Christian simply because of that. I had an intellectual acceptance of the idea that Jesus was God and that He died for the sins of mankind. I lived a pretty clean life. I thought that this made me a Christian. But it wasn't until I was twelve years old that I understood that there was something more. At a summer Bible camp I heard someone explain that what God requires is that we individually place our trust in Jesus as our personal Savior. To receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life I must trust in Jesus. I must accept Him as MY Savior. I must invite Him into MY life. Lydia likewise heard a similar challenge from Paul.

So after worshipping God and listening to the gospel the Lord opened Lydia's heart. The light went on inside her. Something clicked. The message made sense. She understood her predicament. She understood the remedy, and she was ready to respond. In a similar way when I finally had the gospel presented to me in a clear way at that Bible camp, it suddenly made sense. I suddenly realized that I was a sinner headed for hell and that I better respond to Jesus, or I was in big trouble.

Notice that v. 14 says that when the Lord opened Lydia's heart, she responded. What was the nature of that response? The immediate response was belief. It was faith in Christ. It was acceptance of the gospel message that she heard from Paul. In a similar way when the light went on in my mind--- when I finally understood that I personally had to exercise faith in Christ--- I prayed a silent but fervent prayer asking Jesus to come in

to my life. This exercise of faith in Jesus is the central responsibility that we have toward God.

It is the Lord who initiates the process. It is God who changes our hearts. But if we will believe in Jesus, we will receive eternal life. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 6:40) Jesus also said in John #6, **“For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”**

Good works do not produce salvation. Good works result from salvation. Thus v. 15 in our passage describes two things that Lydia did. First, she got baptized. She and her other household members who apparently also heard the message and responded got baptized in water. (PROJECTOR OFF) The pattern in the Book of Acts seems to have been that new believers went right out and got baptized after they believed. It is perhaps unfortunate that today that there is so often a delay between people's acceptance of the gospel and their baptism.

The other thing that Lydia did was that she opened her house up to the missionaries. The text clearly indicates that they weren't bugging her for a place to stay and that she reluctantly gave in. Luke says that “she urged us,” and finally “she prevailed upon us.” Thus Lydia sought to serve God by exercising hospitality toward these spokesmen for the Lord.

Given these truths about the sovereignty of God--- given the evidence from our passage that God uses insignificant surroundings and insignificant people to accomplish good things and that it is He who changes the hearts of individuals to do good things, how should we respond? It would seem that we should **first** be grateful toward God for choosing us. If it is indeed the Lord who initiates the process by which we as individuals come to faith in Him, then we need to maintain an attitude of gratitude toward Him. We need to be grateful that He sees fit to use us in the midst of our humble surroundings and often limited abilities. (EPHESIANS 2:8-9) Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8-9, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”**

Then, **secondly**, we need to make sure that we are more than just worshipers of God like Lydia was before she encountered Paul and his companions. We need to make sure that we have truly placed our faith in Christ for eternal life and forgiveness of sins. It is only through an exercise of trust in Jesus that we can get to heaven.

And then, **thirdly**, we should pray for unbelievers. If it is the Lord who opens the hearts of unbelievers, then we Christians need to be praying for the lost people around us. We need to appeal to a sovereign God to touch the hearts of these people. The Lord has told us to pray for them. The evidence from the Scriptures and from our own experiences is that these kinds of prayers do make a difference.

It seems to me that the applications that we ought to take away from this passage are that we need to be grateful to God for choosing us for salvation. We need to make sure that we have indeed placed out trust in Jesus for eternal life and forgiveness of sins. And we need to pray for unbelievers asking the Lord to change their hearts.

As we close this part of our service, let's pick at least one of these areas as a matter for prayer. As we bow for a moment of silent prayer, express your gratitude to God for choosing you, trust in Jesus as your Savior and/or pray for the Lord to open the heart of an unbeliever in your sphere of influence.