

Easter 6 / May 22, 2022

Acts 16:14

*“One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”*

The Lord opened her heart

Paul began his ministry in Macedonia preaching in the city of Philippi. Philippi was a Roman colony, which meant it enjoyed the same political and economic privileges as Rome. It was a colony because it was made up of Roman citizens, in particular retired soldiers who were rewarded for their service with a place to live. There were some Jewish residents and converts to Judaism, such as Lydia, but the Jewish population was small. Ten men were required to form a synagogue. There was no synagogue, because there were not enough Jewish men. In fact, only women are mentioned as being present at the Jewish place of prayer and the only woman mentioned was a Gentile convert to Judaism.

This was an unlikely place for the gospel ministry to begin in Europe. Paul generally began his outreach in places with a significant Jewish population. Christ had commissioned him to preach the gospel to the Jews dispersed throughout the Roman world. Paul’s commission also included the Gentiles. There was always a large number of Gentiles attached to Jewish synagogues. According to human reasoning, Philippi didn’t seem like the best place to begin the Macedonian outreach. The Holy Spirit had other ideas. Paul didn’t question the Holy Spirit. He went where he was sent and wherever he went, he spoke the gospel of Jesus as the Christ. As the Spirit would have it, this was the perfect place. The Lord opened Lydia’s ears to hear the gospel. She believed and was baptized. When the word is spoken the Spirit opens ears to listen and hearts to believe.

There was no synagogue, but the Jews and Gentiles attached to Judaism, would gather at the river each Sabbath to listen to the scriptures, sing and pray. God’s word doesn’t need a house to be heard. It goes forth into the world and wherever it goes, the Holy Spirit opens ears to listen, opens hearts to receive Jesus and creates faith in the human soul. Paul joined one of these Sabbath gatherings and when the opportunity afforded itself, he proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, proving his point through the Old Testament scriptures. Whenever the Spirit provided the opportunity Paul spoke the word. Paul’s job was not to make people listen. He was commissioned to speak the word. He left it to the Holy Spirit to open people’s ears to listen and their hearts to believe. One person plants, another person waters, the Spirit gives growth!

Not everyone who heard Paul speak believed or even listened. The Roman governor Felix was afraid when he heard Paul speak and he sent him away. The governor Festus told him he was out of his mind. But this time it was different. As Paul preached, the most amazing thing happened. The Holy Spirit worked the miracle of faith in the heart of a woman named Lydia. It wasn’t Paul’s words, it was God’s word that created faith. It wasn’t Paul’s speech. It was the Holy Spirit working through the words Paul spoke, who gave the miracle of faith. Luke, gives full credit to the Holy Spirit saying, *“The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”* Praise God for His word. Take every opportunity to hear it and read it. Think about it. Meditate upon it. Pray about it. Thank God for the word and for the Holy Spirit, who opens our ears to listen and who opens our hearts to believe. Thank Him especially for the word of Jesus our Saviour and Redeemer.

The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what Paul said and to believe his words. When Paul spoke to the philosophers in Athens, they closed their ears. They would not listen, because he said things that were contrary to their way of thinking. When Jesus spoke in the home of Lazarus, Martha was distracted by meal preparations. She was too busy to listen. It is important for us to consciously and intentionally hear the word of God and to pray the Holy Spirit to open our hearts to believe and our minds to understand. The first work of the Holy Spirit is to open our ears to listen to the word and to receive it as God’s word. Paul blessed the believers at Thessalonica, because they received the words spoken by the apostles, as the word of God. He wrote, *“We also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, that you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”*

These texts teach two important things. First, God’s word is powerful, active and never without effect in the hearts of those who listen. Secondly, there is no gathering too small or place too humble for the Holy Spirit to be present to do his work. Jesus said, *“where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there with them.”* Whether it is a group numbering thousands, or a small gathering by a river, the Holy Spirit works through the word. Great things happen when the Holy Spirit works. Faith is created. Faith is nourished and given growth. Faith comes through hearing the word of Christ.

Lydia is called a '*worshipper of God*'. She was a Gentile, who had come to believe the God of Israel was the one true God, the Maker of heaven and of earth. Because the Jewish people at that time believed the Lord had made covenant only with Israel, people like Lydia were welcomed into the community, but were not allowed full membership. When she heard that God had made a new covenant in Christ Jesus, which extended to people from every nation under heaven, she embraced Jesus as Saviour, confessed him as Lord and was baptized along with her household. The seed previously planted and nourished in her heart through the word she heard from the Jews, germinated in faith and belief in Jesus as Lord. We should never despair of the power of the word to have an effect in our hearts and in the hearts of others. Seed and re-seed. Know that God is at work through His word.

The conversion of Lydia is reminiscent of a similar event in Jerusalem. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit opened the hearts of three thousand people to pay attention to what was said by Peter. They paid close attention. They were cut to the heart by his words, saw their sins and cried out, "*brothers what must we do?*" Peter led them to Jesus. He said, "*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*" These people who had previously disbelieved, now believed. These people who once rejected Jesus as the Christ, now received Him in their hearts as their God and Saviour. Where the word is spoken the Holy Spirit is present to create, nourish and strengthen faith in those who hear.

We cannot make ourselves or anyone else believe. Faith is a gift inspired and worked within us by the Holy Spirit. However, we can speak the word. We can share the word. We can hear the word. We can put ourselves and others, in places and positions where the word is present. The Spirit is present with the word and so wherever the word is present, faith becomes a possibility. Share the word. Invite others to hear the word. As God said through Isaiah, "*my word that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*" The word of God is living and active and never without effect in lives of those who have ears to hear. It is powerful to open our hearts to Jesus and give us faith to believe.

It wasn't much to see, just a small group of women who had gathered beside the river on a Sabbath to pray. But from this humble beginning the Holy Spirit began to call, gather and enlighten a community of faith in the city of Philippi. The first person the Lord called to faith was a woman named Lydia. Beginning with this woman, the Holy Spirit began to reach out to Roman province of Macedonia and eventually to all of Europe; offering healing, hope and forgiveness through faith in the Saviour's name.

Never doubt the power of God's word, or despair of its potential to affect the world and our lives. The word of God is living and active. The word of God is never without effect in lives of those whose hearts are open to listen. God bless us with the Holy Spirit. May He open our ears to pay attention to His word and deepen our understanding. May He strengthen our hearts with faith in Jesus through the hearing of the gospel. Be assured that He who has begun this good work within us will bring it to fulfillment in the day of Jesus, grant us a share in His resurrection and a place in His house forevermore. In Jesus' Name Amen.