

-Save This Page as a PDF-

Lydia's Conversion in Philippi

16: 11-15

50-51 AD

Lydia's conversion in Philippi DIG: Compare verse 13 with 14:1 and 17:2. What does the fact that there was no synagogue in Philippi mean with respect to the Jewish community there? How did that affect Paul's strategy for his ministry? Why did these women meet near a river? What did Lydia have to do with Thyatira? What was unusual about her name? Was it a surprise that she also sold purple fabrics? What are the we or us passages about?

REFLECT: How did the Lord open your heart to respond to the gospel? What people did he use as part of the process? Where do you have an "open door" for ministry right now? In your home? School? Work place? Community? How will you step in and fill it?

As a result of **Paul's** vision of a **man from Macedonia pleading with him**, saying: **Come over and help us (16:9)**, **Luke** tells us that **we (Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke) put out to sea from Troas**. By this time, **Luke** had joined the missionary team and traveled with **them (to see link click [Bx](#) - Paul's Vision of the Man of Macedonia: A closer look at the "us" or "we" passages and sea passages)** and gives some details of **their** voyage across the Aegean Sea. **They made a straight course for Samothrace** and stayed that night. **It** was a rocky island, about half way between **Troas** and **Philippi**, whose jagged peak rises to 5,000 feet above sea level. **They** must have enjoyed a favorable wind to complete **their** 150-mile journey in only two days, since it took **them** five days on **their** return (20:6). **The next day we** sailed **on to Neapolis**. **They** did not stop to preach in **Neapolis**, but **from there** continued on to **Philippi**, about ten miles inland - that **Luke** notes was a **leading city of the district of Macedonia as well as a Roman colony**. **We** stayed in this city for several days (16:11-12).

They didn't think of **themselves** as passing from the continent of Asia to Europe. These terms were in use, but the Aegean was Greek on either side. **They** had, instead, the excitement of approaching a new province, bringing them nearer to **Rome**. **They** knew that

beyond **Macedonia** they could reach Achaia and Italy, and the vast lands of Gaul, Spain, Germania, even the mist-bound island of Britain lately added to the empire; all except Rome untouched by the Good News. **They** were not bringing military might or a political program; just four men - and **Another**, invisible.³⁶⁹

Philippi was an important **Roman colony** city, in fact, the only such **colony** that **Luke** actually describes as such. It lay on the Via Egnatia, the main east-west route across **Macedonia**, connecting **Rome** with its eastern provinces. While **the city** was originally built and fortified by Philip of **Macedonia**, father of Alexander the Great, about 358 BC and named after him, the **Philippi** that **Luke** and **Paul** knew was a metropolis run on **Roman** principles and **Roman** law. This is a very important fact as the story develops. **Roman** citizenship was highly valued in such a place. **The city** prospered not only because it was in a very fertile region, but because there were still active mines in the area, especially gold mines.

Philippi was a military **city**. When Antony had been defeated by Octavian in 31 BC, he not only made **the city** a **Roman colony**, but he even gave **Philippi** the *ius italicum*, the legal character of a part of Italy, even though it was outside Italy. This was the highest honor that could be bestowed on a provincial city, for it meant that the Philippians were self-governing, exempt from poll and land taxes, and they could purchase or sell land and engage in civil lawsuits. It was, in short, a microcosm of **Roman** life at that time.

Finding no synagogue **on Yom Shabbat**, **we** went outside the gate to the **Gangites River**, where **we** expected a place of prayer to be. But how did **Paul** know that there would be a **prayer** meeting by **the river**? **Jewish custom and the Oral Law** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ [Ei](#) - The Oral Law**) said that if there were not enough sufficient Jews in the area to maintain a synagogue, then the public worship should take place in a clear area, preferably by a river so there would be easy access for a *mikveh*, or ritual immersion. **Paul** knew that **Philippi's** Jewish community was too small to form a synagogue. A *minyan* (a quorum of ten men) would have been enough for a regular synagogue service, and a modified version of the service could proceed with fewer men, or even with no men and only **women**, as is the case here. And **Luke** said that **we** went to **the river**, found a small group of **women**, **sat down** (the normal posture for teaching) and began speaking with them (16:13).³⁷⁰ Lacking a man to lead **them**, these **women** met to pray, read from the TaNaKh, and discussed what **they** had read. To be taught by a traveling rabbi such as **Paul** was no doubt a rare privilege.

It is significant that the first people **Paul** preached to in Europe were **women**. Those who

reject **his** teaching on the role of **women** often caricature **him** as a male chauvinist. But he was not prejudiced, as **his** eagerness to speak to this group of **women** shows. **Paul's** attitude was in sharp contrast to that of **his** fellow Pharisees. They would not lower themselves to teach a woman, and regularly in their rote prayers they thanked **ADONAI** that they were neither a Gentile, a slave, or **a woman**. **Paul's** teaching also ran counter to the treatment of women in Greco-Roman society. **He** valued the ministry of **women** such as **Phoebe (Romans 16:1)**, the various **women** among those **he** greeted in **Romans 16:3ff**, and even **Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3)**.³⁷¹



There by **the river**, **Paul** encountered **a certain woman named Lydia (16:14a)**. We've seen **Paul** have more thrilling encounters. Nothing outwardly dramatic happened. Almost seemed ho-hum, didn't it? Was this all that **God** had in mind - one woman's reception of the gospel - when **He** resisted **Paul's** plan to preach **His** Word in the direction **he** was headed (see **Bx - Paul's Vision of the Man of Macedonia**)? But after temporarily closing a door in the province of Asia, **ADONAI** strained **Paul's** eyes to see a much wider vision. The gospel of **Yeshua Messiah** went to Europe! Within a couple hundred years, Christians numbered in the tens of thousands in Europe. When we hear people say, "When **God** closes a door, **He** opens a window," sometimes we just might be underestimating **Him**. In this case, **He** closed a door and opened a continent. And it all started with a businesswoman named **Lydia**.³⁷² (Art by Sarah Beth Baca: see more information on Links and Resources).

Luke presents **five cameos** of important believing **women** in a variety of roles they assumed (see

Bd - Signs and Miracles Follow Peter: A closer look at Luke, Women and Ministry), and **she** was one of **them**. Because **her** home was located in the Roman province of **Lydia**, it is likely that **Lydia** was not so much **her** personal name as the name of **her** business. **She** was **a seller of purple cloth from the city of Thyatira (16:14b)**, the site on one of the

seven churches of **Revelation** (see the commentary on **Revelation Bc - The Church at Thyatira**), which was the part of Asia Minor called **Lydia**. Royalty and the wealthy knew **Thyatira** for producing **purple** dyed goods and it was obviously a very profitable business. The fact that **Lydia** had a **house (61:15)** large enough to accommodate the four missionaries and some from the emerging **church at Philippi (16:40)** points to **her** wealth. **She** may have been known as **the Lydian lady**. Three sequential aspects of **Lydia's** conversion stand out in the narrative.

First, **she was a worshiper of God (16:14c NASB)**. There were three levels of Gentile relationship to Judaism. The first level was **God-fearers**, these were Gentiles who became convinced that **ADONAI** was the only true **God**, they abandoned their paganism and idolatry, but they did not choose to become a proselyte in any form. There was no adoption of Jewish customs or practices (see **Be - The Centurion's Vision**). The second form is the proselyte of the gate. This was a Gentile who adopted many Jewish practices like celebrating Shabbat and the feasts of Isra'el, but did not become a full proselyte. Most of these were men because this category didn't require circumcision. Then you had full proselytes who were total converts. Most of these were women.³⁷³ So it seems that **Lydia** was a proselyte. **Hers** was a **seeking heart**, and **she** had already turned from pagan idolatry to worship **the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**. **Lydia's seeking** was the first step of **her** spiritual liberation. Yet **she**, like all sinners, did not seek **God** on **her** own until **He** sought **her**. In **Romans 3:11**, Paul wrote: **There is no one who understands, no one who seeks after God**. And Yeshua added: **No one can come to Me unless My Father who sent Me draws them (John 6:44)**.

Second, not only was **Lydia** seeking, but **she was** also **listening** (Greek: *ekouen*, the imperfect verb here suggests *more than one meeting*) to the gospel proclaimed by **Paul (Romans 10:17)**. Many hear the sound of the life-giving message preached without really **listening** to it (**16:14d**). They are like **Paul's** companions on the Damascus Road, who, although they heard its sound, **did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking (Acts 22:9)**. Our **Lord** condemned those who heard without **listening (Matthew 13:11-17)**.³⁷⁴

And third, the Lord opened her heart to respond to what Paul was saying (16:14e). Here we have the divine side of conversion. We are all spiritually dead. Just as dead as if we were physically at the bottom of the ocean with our lungs full of water. If that were the case, we could not save ourselves physically. We are dead. The same is true spiritually (**Ephesians 2:1; Colossians 2:13**). **God** always has to make the first step toward us in the salvation process. Like **Lydia**, we are saved when we **respond** to the light **God** has given

us. This is the human side of conversion. When the gospel does come to us, it is not only in word, but also **in the power of the Ruach ha-Kodesh and with full conviction (First Thessalonians 1:6)**. But to be sure, this does not remove our responsibility to repent and believe once the gospel is understood.³⁷⁵

As was customary in the early Messianic Community/Church, **Lydia, along with her household (she was a wealthy woman with household servants) were immersed immediately after their conversion, no doubt in the Gangites River near a place of prayer. Immersion** is the outward sign of an inward conviction. It is the believers' identification with **Yeshua Messiah** and is an act of obedience, but plays no role in salvation. After **her immersion she urged us (all four of the missionaries) to accept her hospitality, saying: If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my house. And she insisted (16:15)**. Hospitality is required of all believers (**Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; First Peter 4:9**), especially **women (First Timothy 5:10)** and leaders in the congregations **of God (Titus 1:8)**. It was critical in the ancient world, where inns were often unsuitable for believers to stay in. They were filthy, dangerous, expensive, and often little more than brothels. To make a home where travelers could be exposed to the love of **Messiah**, family life and fellowship was a high priority for believing **women (First Timothy 5:9-10)**. **Lydia's** hospitality gave proof that **she** was a truly liberated **woman (John 13:35)**.³⁷⁶

We must not conclude that because **ADONAI opened Lydia's heart, Lydia's part in her conversion was entirely passive. She** listened attentively to the spoken word (Greek: *rhema*) of Paul, and it is the word that brings a sinner to the Savior. **I tell you, whoever hears My word and trusts the One who sent Me has eternal life. [That person] does not come into judgment, but has passed over from death into life (John 5:24)**. The same **God** who ordained the end, **Lydia's** salvation, also ordained the means to the end, **Paul's** witness of **Yeshua Messiah**. **We should always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits for salvation through the sanctification by the Ruach and belief in the truth. He called you to this salvation through the proclaiming of the Good News, for you to gain the glory of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah (Second Thessalonians 2:13-14)**.³⁷⁷