

SEVEN SAVED SINNERS

Or How God Saves Men

A study of God's Varieties of Religious Experiences in the Book of Acts

by

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE CONVERSION OF LYDIA

THE STUDY

Acts 16:12-15

The Occasion

Paul and Silas come to Philippi on the Apostle's second missionary journey in response to Paul's vision of the pleading man of Macedonia. They had been directed by the Holy Spirit to evangelize Europe through the fact that the Spirit forbade them to preach the Word in Asia.

Having looked around for a place to begin operations in Philippi, they are directed to a prayer meeting outside the city by a riverside. There they find a handful of devout women. Quietly, they sit down with them to tell them the story of the Gospel.

The Subject

Lydia, an Asiatic business woman, a seller of purple cloth from Thyatira, is the first, if not the only convert of the group. She may have been a Jewish proselyte, or even a true Jew, though her name belies this. At any rate, she was devout enough to close up her business in a pagan city and find her place on the Jewish Sabbath with those who loved to pray.

The Agent

Paul here does a definite and successful piece of individual soul winning. Of course, God had opened Lydia's heart.

The Accompaniment

Everything is quiet in this conversion, neither man nor devil seeming to oppose.

We wonder if the devil is caught napping in this affair, since we note he is very angry a little later when the evil spirit is cast out of the soothsaying damsel. The quiet effectiveness of Spirit-directed personal work is seen here.

The Results

The results of Lydia's conversion are far-reaching. Her heart was opened and she became a Christian. Her home was opened and became a church. The heart of Lydia became a doorway for a revival in Philippi, and for the evangelization of Europe.

Significant Lessons

God's greatest movements start from insignificant beginnings, most times. The evangelization of Europe started in a prayer meeting, and not at a banquet. The Church, today, is starting too many things by sitting down to eat instead of kneeling down to pray. The man of Macedonia turned out to be a woman. God alone knows the possibilities of a woman's life saved and consecrated to Him. Here, again, is God's directing grace choosing outstanding leadership.

THE SERMON

THE SALVATION OF WOMANHOOD— OR WHEN A WOMAN BELIEVES

Acts 16:12-15

A little coast-plying vessel is sailing at a merry clip directly before a brisk summer breeze blowing westward across the historic Aegean Sea from the sunny shores of Asia Minor. Among the motley group of passengers on board are four men bound on a very uncertain mission.

The leader of the group is a small bearded figure who would be a nondescript individual were it not for his magnificent head, and the rather sad, far-away look in his eyes—the attitude of one who seems to see things beyond the horizon. He is unmistakably a Jew, but his quiet dignity tells of culture and refinement which is Grecian. He is so at ease in the jostling, jabbering crowd on the little coast vessel that we are compelled to note a mien of self-resignation which approximates a beauty nearly heavenly. This man's name is Paul.

With him are three other travelers of like quiet earnestness. One is a young man, tall and of fine face, with keen eyes and athletic bearing. His friends call him Timotheus. We hear them call another by the name of Silas. He is less attractive; is older, but his face is kind and earnest.

The fourth figure is by far the most outstanding of the group. His is the face of a scholar, features finely moulded and Grecian in character. He has the quiet, unperturbed attitude of the scientist. His speech is exquisite, and his voice resonant. This is Luke, the physician.

But the first man is obviously the leader of the group, and the others wait respectfully on his word.

The ship lands at Neapolis, and the quartet disembark and make their way completely through the city and out into the country on one of the solid Roman roads that winds north and west to the thriving bustling city of Philippi, the chief metropolis of Macedonia in Greece. On they go, through the busy streets, this little man and his three companions, unnoticed by the populace, and find a little inn where they are lodged inexpensively.

As far as that city was concerned, these men were unheralded and unsung, and their presence caused not a ripple. What was the arrival of four harmless travelers to the doings of the mighty Roman Empire in that day? Yet the coming of Paul and his companions to Philippi was of greater importance to that city and of greater moment to the whole world than the conquests of the great King Philip, after whom the city had been named.

Now what had brought them on this journey? A whole chain of events had entered in. Some of them were natural, others supernatural. It was Paul's second missionary journey. Nearly twenty years before, he had found Christ on the Damascus Road. Nearly a decade had elapsed since the church at Antioch had sent Barnabas and him out as their special missionaries.

Strong churches had been established throughout Asia Minor, and Syria, and Paul had desired to continue his work down into Asia—the millions of India and China and the isles of the sea, perhaps were claiming his attention—but the Spirit forbade this.

Then came a vision at Troas; a man of Macedonia appeared to Paul in the night, a man standing and praying him saying, **“Come over into Macedonia and help us!”**

This vision made a tremendous impression upon Paul, and after counsel with his friends they decided that the vision was the call of the Lord to Macedonia and, the direction of the Spirit into Europe, and the passing of the Gospel to the west. “Westward the course of empire takes its way,” wrote Bishop Berkley, many centuries after this event, but the beginnings of the westward march of the Gospel are seen here.

If they felt that God was going to give them a hilarious reception because of the vision, they were gravely mistaken, and when they got to Philippi they found no welcoming committee. Sadder still, they found practically no religious life in the city. There was no synagogue there, and, if there had been ten male Jews of prominence, there could have been a synagogue, and doubtless would have been.

On the contrary, religious meetings were apparently not permitted in the city, and all semblance of religious life had to be carried on outside its environs. So out by a riverside, where prayer was permitted to be made, these men find a number of devout women, and they sit down with them and tell them the story of the Gospel.

I never read this story without wondering where the men were. Surely there must have been some devout men, but, if there were any, they were in an apostate condition and, probably, out playing golf, or whatever was its gaming equivalent in that day.

Oh, the faithfulness of womanhood! God alone knows where we might be were it not for the faithfulness of womankind. Womanhood has done much for the Gospel, but the Gospel also has done much for womanhood.

The very fact that Paul was sitting down with a group of women and telling the simple story shows the power of the Gospel, for Paul in his Jewish days, or perhaps better to say his Judaistic days, as a strict Pharisee had oftentimes repeated the Pharisee's prayer:

*“Oh God,
I thank thee that I am neither a Gentile,
nor a slave,
nor a woman.”*

But the Lord Jesus had taught him to say that **“in Christ is neither bond nor free, neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, but Christ is all and in all.”**

Now, according to the story, they had at least one convert. Her name was Lydia, and her we study here.

I. SOME FACTS CONCERNING THIS WOMAN

She was a business woman—a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira. As we read this story, it seems that we are dealing with an up-to-date matter. Women in business seems to be a very modern idea, but apparently some of them were in business back in New Testament times. Of course, they were in the minority, these business women, but, today, womanhood has entered every door of the business field, and there's not a vocation which she does not occupy.

Doubtless Lydia had many of the outward manifestations of genuine leadership; she was an exceptional business woman, and there are indications that she was rich. The Apostle Paul, with his eager mind and spirit and keen eye for leadership, would very readily be attracted to her. Not that the Apostle worshipped wealth, but he did appreciate worth. The Church should never bow to the domination of the dollar, but it should acquiesce to the possibilities of Christian leadership in those who have made a success in the field of business.

Lydia was a consecrated business woman, a Gentile woman, doubtless, but perhaps a Jewish proselyte, one of the “God-fearers” of that time, like Cornelius.

Her consecration is evidenced by the fact that she was glad to shut up shop in the pagan city on the Jewish Sabbath and go out with this small group and worship God. Truly, this is proof of the genuineness of her faith. Every devout soul, it seems, instinctively recognizes the necessity of one day in seven given over to worship. Any violation of this rule is hypocrisy and means spiritual death.

I read some time ago of a little boy who came to his mother with a very worried question.

“Mamma,” the boy said, “I'm awfully afraid that Daddy won't ever get to heaven.”

With a look of surprise, the mother said, “Why, son, why do you say that? Your Daddy believes in God and is a Christian. What do you think will keep him out of heaven?”

“Well,” replied the lad, “Daddy seems so busy all the time, he can’t leave the store to play with me, and he can’t leave the store to go to church, and he can’t leave the store to go to prayer meeting; so I am afraid he won’t be able to leave the store to go to heaven.”

Too much of business is infected with this awful disease that, of itself, seems so harmless because it is merely negative, but which is deadly in reality; but we are thankful to note that this woman did not allow her business life to interfere with her obligations to God.

It has been my joy to know a great number of business women as church members, and almost all of them if they were good business women, were also faithful Christians. Not only did I find them faithful to the service of the church, but faithful to the tasks that were given them; but another and very important factor of their lives was that, in practically every case, I discovered them to be generous givers to the work of the church and the Kingdom of God. Many of them were businesslike in their dealings with God, and were tithers and faithful in their tenth.

Oh, for more folks who have religion in their business, and who put business into their religion.

But there are other kinds of women in business, and what a detriment to society they have made of themselves. They work like men, they work with men. They sin like men, and they sin with men; and no small part of the degradation of the lost morals of our day comes from the fact that women, forced to leave their homes because of economic and social conditions, have gone into business with men and have lowered their standards in moral things.

Men do not like women to be their equal; especially, they do not like them to be their equal in immorality. Men desire to put women on a pedestal, and, unfortunately, the intermingling of men and women in business and in factories has lowered the standard and has lowered male appreciation, and chivalry is all but gone from the race.

Every hard working business woman needs diversion, especially religious diversion. Many seek happiness in a career, and think that success will bring peace and blessings; but Jenny Lind at the height of her career and popularity in America realized this to be false. She said once to a friend that her experience was that of the poet:—

“In vain I seek for rest in all created good,
It leaves me still unblessed and makes me cry for God.”

Business women may find just the relief they desire in the work of the church and the kingdom of God, and we may truthfully say that the whole cause of Christ would have gone under a thousand times but for faithful womanhood, for the manhood of the church has oftentimes been very spasmodic in its efforts and faithfulness; but womanhood has kept the fires of morals and spirituality alight by prayer, by faithful attendance upon the house of God, and by faithful participation in the work of the Kingdom of God.

Lydia was a woman spiritually prepared.

Dr. Clovis Chappell suggests: “Little did Lydia dream that Sabbath morning that she was going to a place that would make her name remembered when the empire of the Caesars had vanished from the centuries. She did not know that anything out of the ordinary would take place. But, because she thought it was her duty and because she needed heart help, she went to this prayer meeting that was held by the riverside under the open sky. She was living up to the best she knew, she was using all the light that God had granted her. This made it possible for Him to lead her into the fullness of the light.”

God had opened Lydia’s heart; she gave heed to the preaching. Paul found his beginning in Europe in her. Ah, God knows his servants, God knows how to start a revival. If only we would seek to do His will explicitly, what blessing God would do. God knows what He wants done, and He knows just who He has to do it.

II. THE BLESSED RESULTS OF HER CONVERSION

Her heart became a doorway. This is typical of womankind—oh, the thousands that God has used in this same way! When a woman’s heart is surrendered to God, I’ve noted from observation that God loves to come trooping through it to bless multitudes. The heart of a redeemed woman seems to be so full of wonderful possibilities.

Lydia’s heart was a doorway for the truth. We read that she accepted Christ and was baptized. A man of Macedonia summoned Paul to Europe, but, true to experience, a woman received him; or, as someone has put it, the man of Macedonia turned out finally to be a woman. She not only received God into her heart, but she received Paul and his message and the things of Christianity into her life.

Lydia became a doorway to a city church. Her home was opened as well as her heart. Give me a Christian woman and I’ll guarantee soon to have a Christian home, and where there’s a Christian home there’s bound to be Christian men and Christian influence.

It is worthy of note that although a business woman, Lydia had a home which, doubtless, was her especial sphere of influence. This proves that she had the true womanly instinct.

We are told that after she was baptized she besought the disciples, saying, “**If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there.**”

Oh, the blessing of the old hospitable homes of other days! Some of them still remain, of course, and many of you were raised in such an one, where they entertained the ministers and the missionaries. Some remember hearing the prevalent joke declaring: “There were ‘locust preachers buzzing around and eating everything in sight,’ and they made some of the children wait to eat at the second table,” but nevertheless they were a blessing to your home and their very presence there proved that goodness was paramount.

In Lydia's home a church was established, one of the greatest in Europe; Paul always loved it, and when you read his epistles to the Philippians you will find that his heart goes out in tenderness and sympathy to the Christians that were gathered in that city and to the little church that began with the conversion of Lydia and the hospitality of her home.

Lydia became the doorway for great revival. The work in Philippi, the work in Europe, started in a prayer meeting. Very significant. I am becoming increasingly suspicious of religious meetings that start with a banquet; that's the way the world accomplishes things, and God never does things in a worldly way.

History is without a single example of a great religious movement that ever started with a meal, because, in that way, we begin with the flesh and end therewith. Great religious movements begin with a great heart-yearning, and then God finishes the task. We inaugurate too much within the church, today, by sitting down to eat, when we ought to be kneeling down to pray.

Many stories are told of the beginning of the great Welsh revival in the early years of the century; but the most likely story is that connected with a lone watcher and wanderer over the Welsh hills. Day after day this man was seen walking along the mountain pathways, finding secluded spots for prayer. Day after day, week after week, month after month, he agonized. But suddenly he was gone. The neighborhood saw him no more; the prayer had ended, evidently, but the work of God had not ended.

Suddenly in a little church in a Welsh village, a little maid got up and simply testified to her faith in Christ and to the blessing that God had brought to her life. It was but a wisp of flame, but suddenly it began to catch and to unite with other wisps of flame, and soon a great revival was sweeping over Wales, with a power and a blessing unequaled since the days of the Apostles.

In too many instances, today, we make prayer a sort of sanctimonious coat of paint for the house of our selfish endeavor; when prayer is not anything superficial, it is fundamental. We should lay prayer down as a foundation, then build the house of our achievement upon it as a basis.

Lydia's heart was a doorway for the conversion of Europe. Lydia herself was not a European, but an Asiatic; her home was not in Philippi but in Thyatira; she merely was in Philippi on business, though she may have maintained a temporary home there. But through her the Gospel got a foothold. If you will read on in this story, you will discover that, with Lydia, Paul got a start for the Gospel in Europe. Then under the power and direction of the Spirit of God he strikes at every centre of civilization, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, finally Rome itself, and all through the doorway of this woman's heart.

III. LYDIA'S LIFE IS A CHALLENGE TO MODERN WOMANHOOD

A challenge to salvation. Womanhood is God's workshop in nature, and oftentimes she is his chief instrument in grace. Oh, how the world needs consecrated women in this dark hour.

Oh womanhood, that listens to my voice, in God's name be saved, and be used of Him.

Lydia is a challenge to faithful living. Womanhood, today, in too many instances is leaving her first estate, that of a helpmeet to the man and becoming his plaything. Shall womanhood sell its high birthright on the altar of our sensuous, senseless age?

Listen, womanhood! Into your arms God has placed the race at its beginning. As a mother your influence is prenatal and, in spite of all the institutions that come into the life of your child, God gives that child to you when it is plastic and when your life and your influence and your prayers can etch in delicate tracery the lines that will in later life develop into the strong delineations of character. What a trust is yours; what an incentive to faithful living!

Lydia is a challenge to all mothers' sons and daughters. Think what you owe tonight to mothers, to sisters, to other godly women.

As I look back at my own experience in the Christian life, and realize how prominent a place womanhood played in my conversion, I am astounded. My own mother prayed for me, gave me to the Lord at birth, and although she died when I was just past five years of age, eighteen years after she was in her grave, I found the Lord. She gave me to the ministry, and God called me into His service.

During the Billy Sunday campaign in Boston, I was led to a saving knowledge of Christ as a result of two forces; first the prayers of my sister, who had recently been led to Christ by the pastor's assistant at Clarendon Street Baptist Church, who was a woman graduate of the Moody Bible Institute, and who joined with my sister in a covenant of prayer for my salvation, and the first one to talk to me about my soul was a little woman in the Tabernacle in Boston, who put her hand upon my shoulder and said, "Young man, don't you want to be a Christian?"

Oh, beloved, if we were to take away the influence of womanhood upon our lives how many of us would ever reach heaven? The percentage would indeed be small.

In a sermon delivered in the chapel of Mansfield College, Oxford, Dr. Selbie told this daring story.

There was a young Frenchman who loved a courtesan. This woman hated her lover's mother. When, in his passion, he offered her any gift in return for her love, she answered: "Bring me your mother's bleeding heart."

In his madness, this young man went to his home and killed his mother, and plucking out her heart, hurried by night through the streets, carrying it to the cruel woman to whom he had given his soul. But as he went he stumbled and fell, and from the bleeding heart came an anxious voice, "Son, are you hurt?"

Not even murder could kill that mother's love. It lived on in the torn heart. It is just a fable, of course, but true in sentiment and true to experience.

When the records of heaven are opened to our redeemed eyes, what a story we shall read of sacrificial womanhood, whose hearts the Lord had opened and through whose hearts the forces of righteousness came trooping to the blessing of the multitude!

“Oh Mother when I think of thee
'Tis but a step to Calvary.
Thy precious hand upon my brow
Is leading me to Jesus now.”

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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