

Gamma

Acts 16

Study 14 3 Surprising Conversions

Leaders Guide

1. vv.11-15. What are we told about Lydia? How did she come to faith? What signs are we given that Lydia was truly converted?

Note: “a place of prayer... on the Sabbath” indicates that these were Jews and God-fearing Gentiles who met weekly for worship, but that there were not enough of them to have an official synagogue. So what Paul and his friends went to was, essentially, a synagogue service of teaching/discussion of God’s Word. First, we learn that Lydia was a businesswoman, a dealer in dyed cloth. She came from Thyatira, a place that was very well known for its dyes (an ancient inscription in that place refers to a guild or association of dyers that was centered in that city). Lydia was either a dyer herself or a trader who used her links to her home city. Second, we learn that she was a “worshipper of God” (v.14). She was already a convert to Judaism, who respected the Old Testament Scriptures and who worshipped the one true God. Here in v.14 we have a classic statement of how people become Christians. “Whose heart the Lord opened to give heed to the things that were spoken by Paul” (ASV) On the one hand, God did not call Lydia directly, but only through the audible preaching of the gospel by a human being. On the other hand, neither Paul’s words nor Lydia’s heart were capable in themselves of making any connection. Her response was only possible because her heart was opened by God. Without that intervention, the listeners’ hearts are closed, and the speakers words are ineffective against that closedness. This fits in with Acts 13:44, where we are told that “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed” — not that “as many as believed were appointed to eternal life”. It is the same here. Lydia’s heart was not opened because she responded to the gospel — she responded to the gospel because her heart was opened. The evidence that she was converted was at least threefold. a) She believed the gospel — “responded to Paul’s message” (v.14). In other words, she found the gospel coherent, attractive, convicting. b) She brought her family to the Lord. We are told she was baptized together with the members of her household (v.15). The word *oikos* (household) we have seen was a far-reaching word. It certainly meant her servants and her children — and the word also was used to indicate infants. If Lydia was married, it would have included her husband. It may mean, though we cannot be sure, that she led other adult members of her household network to Christ as well. c) She made her home a ministry center. She invited the

missionary team to live and operate out of her home. Doubtless it became a housechurch. Once the heart is opened to God, your resources — your wallet, possessions, and home — are open as well.

2. vv.16-19. Contrast the pre-Christian spiritual state of the slave-girl with that of Lydia. Contrast the ministry of Paul to Lydia with that of Paul to the slave-girl. What is Luke trying to show us?

The contrast between the very mainstream figure of Lydia and the extremely exotic figure of the slave girl could not be greater. “They differ so much from one another that [Luke] might be thought to have deliberately selected them in order to show how the saving name of Jesus proved its power in the lives of the most diverse types...” (Bruce, p.332). Who was the girl? The NIV says she “had a spirit by which she predicted the future” (v.16). But the Greek says, literally that she “had the spirit of python”. In ancient Greek culture, a “pythoness” was a person who was believed to be possessed by the spirit of the python which guarded the mythic temple of Apollo and the Delphic oracle. The Greeks called these people “ventriloquists” (see Bruce, p.332 n.35), because they uncontrollably made clairvoyant predictions and proclaimed prophecies and gnomonic utterances in all sorts of strange and foreign voices. Since the society of that time considered them inspired by Apollo and the python, many people came to the masters of this slave girl and paid money to ask her questions and have her make her statements to them (“she earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling” v.16). Instead of having any pity on her for her bizarre behavior and obvious torment, they used her to make money. So the contrast between Lydia and the slave girl cannot be greater. Lydia is a very respectable business woman, a pillar of the community; but the slave girl is scarcely a member of human community at all. She is almost literally a piece of property in a freak show. Lydia is a very moral and religious person who loved and knew the Bible; but the slave girl is completely alienated from any moral sense or knowledge of the truth. Lydia has much to be proud of; but the slave girl is a completely marginalized non-person, without a shred of dignity. Lydia has a moderate amount of power, both social and economic; but the slave girl is completely powerless, without even any self-control. All this is to show, as F. F. Bruce said, that the gospel can address and transform absolutely any condition. It is not only for the cultured and the able, nor is it only for the helpless and the broken. The contrast extends to how Paul ministers to the two women. When Luke calls her a “pythoness”, he is not buying in to all the superstition and mythology, but he (and Paul) does recognize her as being demon possessed young girl, controlled by unseen masters and exploited by her human masters. With one stroke he breaks the power that both have over her. How? Over a period of days we are told that Paul grew “troubled” (v.18), which probably means that he became deeply grieved and distressed for her. Finally, he publically challenged the demonic spirit in the name of Jesus, and it came out of her. Even her masters saw that she had new peace of mind. She had become calm and “normal” and they were howling mad! Lydia had come to Christ very quietly, but the slave girl very noisily! Lydia had come to Christ in a Bible

study, stressing how Christ fulfills the law and prophets; but the slave girl was brought to Christ through a power encounter. To Lydia, Jesus was presented as the Messiah of Israel; to the slave girl, he was presented as the bondage-breaker, the all-powerful liberator. What does this show us? The fact is that that Jesus is also the liberator for Lydia, and he is also the fulfiller of the law for the slave-girl — but in their initial encounter, each was confronted with a different feature of Jesus manifold glory. So we need to be flexible when presenting the gospel. We must consider how different a person's problems, needs, and issues can be! Again we see that the gospel is as much for moral and "nice" people as for broken and addicted people.

3. vv.19-40. a) What led the jailer to believe? b) Compare his pre-Christian spiritual condition with that of Lydia and the Pythoness. c) How does Paul lead him to Christ?

We have to gloss over the way that Paul and Silas found themselves in jail. The owners of the slave-girl were not interested at all in the fact that she was now liberated and at peace — they were just furious that their income from her was gone. They cleverly hid their true anger with Paul and Silas, and tried to arouse the populace's racist attitudes by talking about these "Jews" who were polluting the culture of "us Romans". Without any trial, the crowd began to beat them and the magistrates imprisoned them. Then follows the memorable account of the conversion of the Phillipian jailer. What led him to faith? a) What led him to seek Christ? First, he must have been astounded that Paul and Silas, who would have been bruised and bleeding, were praying and singing hymns to God at midnight (v.25) (It is hard not to think about Elihu's assertion that God gives us "songs in the night" Job 35:10!) So the Philippian jailer, and all the prisoners (v.25) had a look at the way Christianity fortifies you to face the worst that life can send. Second, when the earthquake came, giving all the prisoners access to freedom, the jailer was shocked to find that Paul and Silas had restrained all the inmates. By doing so, they had saved his life. This act of service to him (and respect for the law) humbled him, and the view of their influence and leadership (over the prisoners) probably awed him as well. This led him to ask emotionally, "what must I do to be saved"? In sum: 1) he was impressed with the character of Christians, and 2) he was dramatically helped in a crisis by Christians.

b) Compare his pre-Christian spiritual condition. The jailer was in many ways "in the middle" between the conditions of Lydia and the Pythoness. He was not a moral, Bible honoring person, but neither was he a person completely out of control and broken. Unlike Lydia, he did not come calmly and gently during a Bible study, knowing what he was doing. But neither was he confronted and pursued by the evangelists in a forceful way. It is doubtful that he knew exactly what he was asking for when asked "what must I do to be saved?" He could not have known very much about what "salvation" would mean (unlike Lydia). He was probably just deeply

aware that these men had a power and character and peace that he completely lacked. He was probably asking: “what do you have that makes you so? without it, I can’t survive!”

c) How Paul led him to Christ. First, Paul summarized the gospel: “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your family” v.31. (Paul does not mean that “if you believe, your family will be automatically saved”, but “this is the way to be saved — not just for you, but for your whole family.) But this summary was not enough. Second, Paul “then... spoke the word of the Lord to him...” (v.32). This shows that a brief gospel summary is not enough. People need to know what “believe” means, what “the Lord Jesus Christ”. Third, Paul rather quickly insisted that this gospel instruction be done in a group! He asked the jailer to gather the family around him to hear the word. This is wise in so many ways. If an individual converts without the rest of his/her family, it can lead to division and alienation within the family. Also, it shows how people tend to come to Christ through natural relationship networks, not “cold turkey” evangelism. Fourth, they were baptized when they believed (v.33). Some other places in the New Testament indicate that the early church gave extensive instruction to converts before they were baptized — so no particular amount of time between belief and baptism can be said to be the “Biblical” one. It depended on the situation. Here Paul thought it important to let the people show their commitment to Christ in a concrete way very quickly. He leads them to closure, to “nailing it down”. The results was wonderful joy (v.34).

4.Surely there were many conversions at Philippi. Why do you think Luke chose three such disparate people to profile for readers?

As John Stott says, “racially, socially, and psychologically they were worlds apart. Yet all three were changed by the same gospel and were welcomed into the same church.” (p.268). Review the differences. a) Racially — Lydia was a foreigner from Asia Minor, the slave-girl probably native Greek, and the jailer probably a Roman. b) Socially — Lydia was probably wealthy, the slave girl was a non-person socially, and the jailer was a middle class civil servant. c) Psychologically/mentally — Lydia was very wise and “pulled together”, the slave-girl was deranged, while the jailer was probably a retired soldier, a common “working man”. d) “Felt needs” — Lydia’s was probably more intellectual, responding to a general dissatisfaction with her view of the world and meaning in life (after all, she had everything else — self-control, success, a family). And Paul responded with a gentle discussion. The slave-girl’s need was deep and emotional. She was an addict with a completely broken life. And Paul responded with a word of command. The jailer’s sense of need was more acute than Lydia’s and yet less so than the slave-girl’s. He seemed to realize that “he didn’t have what it takes” to face life. And Paul responded to this man of action (probably not an intellectual) with a fairly direct presentation and then he called him to a decision. What is most surprising (and maybe very deliberate) is that these three persons were the three persons that were the very opposite of what a Jewish male like Paul would have been. In fact, every Jewish head of a house would rise in the morning and thank

God (in a very typical and common prayer) that he was not born a Gentile, a woman, or a slave. Yet here were these three kinds of people all now united with Paul as brothers and sisters, and now the new foundation of the new church! It is noteworthy that Luke ends the story referring to all the new Christians as their “brethren” (v.40). How important it is to show the world that through Christ people can become brothers and sisters who, outside the church, cannot even get along.

5. The Gospel is for everyone. However everyone is different. Think through how these different people have different struggles, pains and lifestyles and how the gospel speak into that. How can we connect with these different people to then share the gospel with them?

1. Foreign Workers / Domestic helpers
2. The rich
3. Intellectuals
4. The religious (cultural Christians)
5. The Marginalized / Oppressed
6. Senior Citizens
7. College students