



Faith Arising from an “Opened” Heart

The episode concerning Lydia in the city of Philippi (cf. Acts 16:12-15) highlights not just God’s wonder-working grace moving in a devout woman’s heart, but also God’s wonder-working grace moving in His servants’ lives. True, “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). Yet, “how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent?” (Romans 10:14c-15a). Before the heart of God’s elect can be “opened” by the convicting power of God’s Word, God must first open a door for His servant to “preach the gospel of

peace, and bring glad tidings of good things” (Romans 10:15b). How the Gospel gained a foothold in “Philippi, which is the chief city of that part of Macedonia” (Acts 16:12) presents a most telling example of God’s unerring Hand of providence at work.

An “Opened” Door

The backdrop is Paul’s second missionary journey. Paul’s first missionary journey (with Barnabas) had resulted in local Gentile churches being established within the provinces of Pamphylia, Phrygia and Galatia – in such cities as Perga (cf. Acts 13:13;



14:25), Antioch in Pisidia (cf. Acts 13:14), Iconium (cf. Acts 14:1), Lystra and Derbe (cf. Acts 14:6, 21). Such was the impact of their ministry that when they returned to the sending church at Antioch (of Syria), “from whence they had been recommended ... for the work which they fulfilled”, they (in the hearing of the entire assembled church) “rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles” (Acts 14:26-27). Now, the purpose of Paul’s second journey was to strengthen the fledgling faith of the new believers in those churches and, in the process, “confirming the churches” (cf. Acts 15:36, 41). Going via an overland

route this time, Paul was accompanied by Silas, with Timothy joining along the way (at Lystra). “And as they went through the cities, ... so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily” (Acts 16:4-5).

Up to this point, things went according to plan. But after they had gone throughout Phrygia and Galatia, for some undisclosed reason, the team was “forbidden” (Acts 16:6) by the Holy Spirit to proceed westward into the province of Asia (i.e. the western coast of Asia Minor). Luke (writer of Acts) used a Greek word that means they were “hindered” from carrying out their plan of advance,

which hinted at inaccessibility to the region – possibly due to routes being closed or some political upheavals. Their only option was to continue northward to Mysia, after which they “assayed” to go northeastward into the province of Bithynia (Acts 16:7). The Greek word used here indicates that they had “made enquiry and diligently examined” the feasibility of a Gospel advance there. But again they were not permitted to – probably due to some language barrier or the forbidding terrain and sparse population in that region.

Be that as it may, “A man’s heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps” (Proverbs 16:9). In all these, God’s providential Hand was at work. When all doors were closed for further Gospel work in Asia Minor, the stage was set for Paul’s missionary foray into Europe. Upon receiving the “Macedonian call” in a night vision at Troas, Paul and his team “came with a straight (i.e. unhindered) course to Samothracia, and the next day to Neapolis; and from thence to Philippi (which is in modern Greece)”, after “assuredly gathering that the Lord had called (them) for to preach the gospel unto them” there (Acts 16:9-12a). Assuredly, when God “set before thee an open door, ... no man can shut it” (Revelation 3:8a)!

Two compelling thoughts should strike us here concerning God’s unerring providential workings. With scriptural hindsight, we realise that Paul would later befriend Aquila and Priscilla at Corinth towards the tail end of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-3), who would then join Paul on a brief stopover in Ephesus

(on the western coast of Asia Minor!) as he sailed back towards Syria (Acts 18:18-19). Their remaining behind at Ephesus would have helped pave the way for Paul's subsequent profitable ministry at Ephesus in his third missionary journey (cf. Acts 19:1, 10)!

Moreover, had Paul's missionary team gone into Bithynia (instead of being redirected westward into Macedonia), they might have ended up venturing into the Central Asian region (of modern states like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan) and perhaps even towards China. But God in His foreknowledge has decreed that the initial crucial "battle for the Truth" be fought on the European front, where great doctrinal statements of faith would be crystallised, and where later the onset of Renaissance and invention of the printing press would usher in a renewed quest and effective dissemination of knowledge, culminating in the Protestant Reformation! God knew ahead of time that Europe was more receptive and would be a better "custodian" of His precious Word than its Asian counterparts in the early centuries of church history.

An "Opened" Heart

Come to think of it, the church in continental Europe had her humble beginnings in Philippi, where the first recorded convert by Paul on European soil was (interestingly enough) a woman and a Gentile – Lydia, a native "of the city of Thyatira" (Acts 16:14), which was situated in Asia Minor. She must have migrated to Philippi for business purposes (she being "a seller of purple") when Paul encountered

her there. Apparently, no synagogue existed at Philippi which would otherwise be Paul's first "preaching-stop". Instead, he and his team "were in that city abiding certain days" (Acts 16:12b), looking out for an opportune moment to act while awaiting their next move. Finally on the Sabbath, they went to the riverside, which was the customary place the Jewish women gathered to pray.

For Lydia to be found in that company would mean that she was a proselyte – a worshipper of Yahweh and a seeker of the living and true God. She had met regularly with these "women which resorted thither" (Acts 16:13b), meaning that they convened by pre-arrangement on a regular basis. Hitherto, she had enjoyed going to these meetings and must have found herself attracted to the God of Israel. No doubt she would have read the Scriptures and had a fairly good working knowledge of God's commands, promises and prophecies. But there was still an emptiness in her heart which all her head knowledge could not fill. There seemed to be something – or Someone – missing! Alas, the devout group of women (like most of the unguided Jews in those days), "knowing only the baptism of John" (Acts 18:25b), needed to be "expounded ... the way of God more perfectly" (Acts 18:26b). But they had no one to expound to them the Scriptures concerning Christ ["and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?" (Romans 10:14b)], since there was no man in their group to take that authoritative position ["and how shall they hear without a preacher?"

(Romans 10:14c)]. That was until Paul arrived on the scene – guided by God’s providential Hand – probably in answer to their fervent prayers!

Paul’s words by the riverbank that Sabbath must have immediately arrested Lydia’s attention, for Scripture says that she “heard” (Acts 16:14a), i.e. with rapt attention. Literally, she clung to the words of every sentence uttered by Paul and paid close attention to the meaning of those words. In the process, her heart was “opened” (Acts 16:14b), being caused to see what was not seen before and made willing to embrace the truth of the Gospel. So much so that “she attended unto (i.e. her mind was held and attracted by) the things which were spoken of Paul” (Acts 16:14c), much like a ship being held in its intended course. Lydia must have felt her heart “burn within” her, as Paul opened to them the Scriptures and presented the Gospel message of the crucified and resurrected Christ.

Instructively, the same impact was not mentioned of the other women in the group. Only concerning Lydia was it said: “whose heart the Lord opened”. This evidently shows God’s unconditional election, regardless of how devout each woman might be – God elects some; God rejects others. In all this, He is sovereign, for “Salvation is of the LORD” (Jonah 2:9b). And therein is also manifested God’s irresistible grace in “opening” a sinner’s heart and drawing that soul to Christ!

An “Opened” House

Now, as soon as Lydia had believed and was baptized, attention was drawn to her “household” (cf. Acts 16:15a). That

would mean that she had children, perhaps a dependent extended family, and likely several servants living under her roof. She seemed to be the leader of her household, given her considerable and godly influence upon the entire family, for her household followed her example in being baptized. This implies that they believed and received the Gospel message also. However, nothing is mentioned of her husband; presumably, she could have been a widow, assuming the role of breadwinner for her house. Being “a seller of purple” (i.e. a trader in purple garments, which were robes worn by high-ranking personnel in those Roman Empire days), she would be a businesswoman of some standing and a woman of means. That being the case, she must have owned a big house, spacious enough not only to accommodate her household, but also to house the missionary team (of at least 4 men, namely Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke).

Lydia’s hospitality was plain to see. She unhesitatingly invited, nay “besought”, Paul’s missionary team to lodge in her house, which she viewed as more a favour upon her than a service to the missionaries. For she said, “If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide (i.e. remain as long as was needed) there” (Acts 16:15b). Besides, her “opened” heart had this ardent desire to hear more of God’s Word. Allowing Paul to stay and hold meetings at her home would surely enable her to learn further spiritual truths. Thus, she “constrained” (Acts 16:15c) them to stay. The language here suggests some initial reluctance on the missionaries’

part to come under her roof – for they knew (given the general population’s hostility towards the Gospel) that their presence could be a potential source of trouble to Lydia. Housing God’s servants could be fraught with risks and come with a great social cost. Bad publicity could be generated amongst the business community, resulting in a loss of business. As subsequent events highlighted (cf. Acts 16:19-23), there could also be the incurring of crowd displeasure and violence, as well as vulnerability to maltreatment by authorities and even imprisonment!

Certainly, Paul was under no illusion about the world’s hatred towards those who support the Gospel work, and was not sure if Lydia’s newfound faith could take all those pressures. Hospitality to God’s servants in times of peace and prosperity is one thing, hospitality in times of hostility and persecution is quite another. But Lydia would have none of it! She knew that it would be difficult for Paul and his team to go around preaching the glorious Gospel in that foreign city if they had to worry about food and lodging. By opening her house to them and taking care of their physical needs, she was in effect expediting their Gospel ministry. So, she “constrained” (literally “compelled by entreating”)

them to abide in her house. She would not take “no” for an answer! In other words, she insisted on accommodating the missionary team for the Gospel’s sake, against their discreet wish of not wanting to bring distress and trouble to their host.

At great risk to herself, her household and her business, Lydia opened her house for the Gospel work. Because of her hospitable faith arising from an “opened” heart, the Gospel gained a foothold in Philippi, where a strong church was flourishing right in her house. For when Paul and Silas were miraculously delivered from the Philippi jail, they “entered into the house of Lydia: and when they had seen the brethren, they comforted them, and departed” (Acts 16:40). Apparently, these “brethren” were saved while Paul had ministered there for “many days” (cf. Acts 16:18a).

Paul’s endeavours in Philippi would in turn serve as a “launching pad” for the Gospel’s forays into Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth (in Greece) and Rome (in Italy). And over the ensuing centuries, the Gospel would continue to spread further inland into the heart of continental Europe – Germany, France, Spain, England, Scotland – and the rest is (church) history!

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