

# A Lydia in the Wilderness

Acts 16:11-15

*Halifax: 9 December 2012*

## **Introduction**

Last week in our sermon series from Acts, we saw how the Lord had given special direction to Paul and his fellow missionaries to go to Macedonia and preach the gospel.

- The Roman province of Asia (where the city of Ephesus was located) was the place they naturally headed after visiting the churches in southern Galatia,
  - but the Spirit of God did not permit it...
- Then they attempted to go north to the province of Bithynia, but the Spirit blocked them again.
  - So then they went to Troas and while there received a special direction to go to Macedonia.
    - Paul actually saw a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

Now I had a whole lot to say to you about guidance based on this passage, but I am not going to attempt to review all of that today.

- Today, we are going to go on and see what Paul and his companions found when they got to Philippi!
  - You can imagine that they must have been quite encouraged to have the vision of this man who was eager to hear the gospel!
  - They immediately set out, no doubt, with eager anticipation.

But when they arrived, they did not find what they might have expected.

- Instead it was a situation that could best be described as:

## **I. Witnessing in the wilderness**

### **A. Where was the welcoming committee?**

1. You remember how it was for Peter when he had a vision to go to the house of Cornelius!
  - Peter showed up and there was Cornelius with all his servants and his friends and his family eagerly waiting to hear the message of God from him.
  - It was the dream of every earnest evangelist to have a room full of people who say, as Cornelius did in Acts 10:33:
    - **Acts 10:33: "We are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God."**

TRANS> Paul and his companions knew all about this!

2. But there was nothing like this at all!
  - a. Philippi was indeed a great city—what Luke calls the foremost city of that region...

- It was a very prominent and wealthy city—having gold mines, silver mines, copper mines, fertile fields, and a famous school of medicine—
  - And it had the highest status a city could have in that day.
  - It was a Roman colony meaning that it was looked at as part of the city of Rome in another place—
    - All of its residents had Roman citizenship,
    - All were exempt from property taxes and poll taxes,
    - And many of them were retired military leaders.

TRANS> A great city indeed!

b. But it was a spiritual wilderness.

- The man in the vision was nowhere to be found.
- There was not even a synagogue where the missionaries could get started.
  - It is very likely that Philippi had followed the example of Rome where Claudius had just issued an edict to banish Jews from the city (in 49 AD).
  - Not all the colonies did this, for in Acts 18, we will find that Corinth has a synagogue and the Aquila and Priscilla are there because of their banishment from Rome.
- It may be that the missionaries are in fact in Philippi illegally...or at least that they would not be allowed to take up residency...
  - This seems quite possible because in the next section a demon possessed girl loudly announces their presence which irritates Paul...
    - And then he and Silas are arrested and beaten, having this charge laid upon them:
      - **Acts 16:20-21: “These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe.”**

c. Whether these details are true or not, the missionaries get off to a slow start...

- Verse 12 tells us that they were staying in the city for some days...
  - The language used here indicates that they were there for a good while.
    - It seems that they were unable to find any inroad for the gospel.

B. We are often disappointed with the response of people to the gospel.

1. I remember as a new believer how I was eager to tell all my old friends about the treasures I had found in Christ!

- How wonderful it would be to tell them what I had found!
- How glad they would be to hear the God news that there is complete reconciliation for sinners in Jesus Christ.
- But to my great disappointment, most of them were not interested.

- They were willing to listen to me because of our friendship, but very few wanted to hear more.

TRANS> Oh brothers and sisters!

2. We know that God has called us to witness!

- We know that we have a glorious gospel that answers to man's deepest and greatest need...
  - But where are the interested people?
- We know that He has elect people that He will save—but where are they?
  - Where are the desperate sinners who used to call up pastors in distress about the state of their souls?
- We know that God is all powerful and that He can and does subdue sinners under the gospel,
  - But why doesn't He do it more often among our people in our city?

3. There is actually an answer to that question...

- There are millions of people who are enthusiastically responding to the gospel all over the world.
  - God is expanding His kingdom mightily.
- But the harvest is very slow for us here in North America because we have been judicially blinded by the Lord.
  - We have had the gospel here for a long time, but we have suppressed it just as Israel did and so were blinded.
  - Over 85% of the people in Nova Scotia have been baptised!
    - We have access to the gospel if we want it, but we have not been grateful, and the Lord is taking away our lampstand.
    - He does that you know!
      - Isaiah and Jeremiah both ministered to Israel in such times.
        - The Lord told them that there would be very little response to their preaching and so it was.

C. But we must keep on witnessing even in the wilderness!

1. See how these faithful missionaries found a way—they found an inroad.

- a. They knew that it was the practice of the Jews,
  - in places where there was no synagogue,
    - to gather by a river on the Sabbath day for prayer and for reading of the word—and if anyone was available, for exposition of the word.
  - Both Philo and Josephus speak about this practice.
    - They say that it was often by a river.

- They say that very simple buildings were sometimes erected for this purpose.
- We are not told if there was a building at Philippi, but it is interesting that Luke mentions specifically that they met outside the city...
  - This may have been because it was illegal to assemble for Jewish worship in Philippi.
  - Remember that all the residents are Roman citizens by default,
    - and we saw how they later describe the Jewish customs as customs that it is not lawful for Romans to keep.
    - So this may have even been a kind of underground church.
- b. We need to understand that God has appointed the assembling together of believers in the places where they live on the Sabbath day from ancient times.
  - There is some evidence that this was begun in the garden when God sanctified the Sabbath day.
    - It was a day set apart as holy from the other days, and what else would you do on a holy day but gather to worship God?
    - What else would you do but put aside your ordinary work and play on the day that God consecrated to remember His glorious works?
  - This is one of those things that we should not have to be told.
    - But in our weakness, the Lord condescended to us to spell things out and commanded in the fourth commandment that we remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy...
      - “Do your work on the other days and keep this day holy.”
    - And in Leviticus 23, He spelled out that all of the Sabbaths (all the holy days that He had given to Israel including the weekly Sabbath) were to be holy convocations...
      - A *convocation* is an assembly—a calling together of persons,
        - and a *holy convocation* is a calling of them together to worship God.
      - On the weekly Sabbath, they did not have to go up to Jerusalem, but they were to gather in all their dwellings:
        - Lev 23:2-3 says: **“Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘The feasts of the LORD, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, these are My feasts. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work on it; it is the Sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings.’”**
    - This is what we also do when we gather each week on the day that God has appointed for us to remember His great works under the New Covenant.
      - We are in the holy convocation right now.

- c. But back to the point—
  - Paul and his companions were of course well aware of these gatherings in places where there was no synagogue,
    - so they go to see if there is such a meeting and they find that indeed there is.
    - Those joined in such an assembly would always welcome a word of exhortation from a visiting rabbi!
  - It is interesting that only women are present at this gathering—or at least we are told that it was women to whom Paul spoke.
    - It may well be that all of the Jewish men had indeed been banished from Philippi and that only god-fearing Greek women (who were not full proselytes) remained.
      - And remember, it was a well known fact that prominent women all over the Roman empire were attracted to the Jewish religion.
        - Juvenal complains of what he calls “the addiction of Roman women to Judaism.”
      - These were such women that remained in Philippi after the Jews were banished, not being themselves Jews, and they continued to meet for prayer and encouragement.
        - This was Paul’s inroad to introduce the gospel at Philippi!

2. We need to look until we find such inroads!

- a. We need to look for any who might be interested in hearing the gospel—any who might be willing to listen.
  - We may be in a veritable wilderness like Philippi,
    - but we need to be constantly looking for an inroad with the gospel.
  - Many of you know that the elders at Covenant want to launch a campaign to reach the many who are in dead churches or who have given upon the church as useless...
    - We believe that there may be some who are interested and open to hear the word if it is not watered down.
      - We know of people who say that they have left the church because there was nothing there—and they are right in the case of many apostate churches.
      - We want to find these people.
    - We also want to reach out to foreigners with the gospel—
      - We are planning to encourage some of you to take a course about reaching Muslims.
  - But all of you need to be looking for inroads for the gospel...
    - With your family, your neighbours, your friends.

- We have a glorious God and marvellous Saviour to proclaim to the people around us!
- b. You show your love for the Lord, for His gospel, and for your neighbours by doing what you can to sow seeds in the wilderness!
  - You don't have to be a great evangelist!
    - Just invite people to church or give them something to read!
    - We have good news to proclaim to the nations!
  - Keep going even though you don't meet with success!
    - Do not let disappointment stop you.
    - Paul at Philippi is an excellent model of going on and doing what you can in the place God has put you!

TRANS> But there is something crucial that is illustrated for us here in Acts 16 if we are going to keep on witnessing in the wilderness and not give up.

- It is something that Paul knew and something that he clearly speaks of in his first epistle to the Corinthians—in chapter 3:

## II. God gives the increase, even in the wilderness.

- In 1 Cor 3:5-7, he says:
  - **1 Cor 3:5-7: Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.**
- With these words, Paul makes it clear that he and other ministers of the gospel could only preach the gospel—they could only sow the seeds.
  - But that only by God's powerful working would there be any increase in the harvest of souls.
  - For anyone to believe and be added to the church, the Lord must make it happen!
  - And this is just what we see illustrated for us in our text—in Acts 16.

### A. God opens the heart of a woman named Lydia!

1. She comes alive in the barren wilderness of Philippi by the grace of God!
  - Look at how Luke describes this in verse 14:
    - **Acts 16:14: Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.**
2. There are several remarkable things about this woman whom God prepared to be the first of Paul's converts upon his arrival in Macedonia.
  - a. First of all, it is remarkable that she is not even from Macedonia originally!
    - She is from Asia! From the city of Thyatira!

- Asia is the place where Paul had just been blocked from going to minister the Word...
  - Instead he is sent to Macedonia...
    - and then, ironically, the first person who responds to the gospel is from Asia!
  - Such are the wonderful ways of the Lord!
  
- b. Second, notice that she said to be “one who worshipped God.”
  - This is usually a technical term for someone who was like Cornelius—
    - a God-fearing Gentile...
    - One who had rejected polytheism and had seen that the true God had revealed Himself to the Jews.
      - These persons often kept the moral law including the Sabbath, but they did not keep all of the Jewish ceremonial laws—
        - such as the food laws and circumcision.
  - So this woman was hungry for the truth.
    - Even though she lived in a spiritual wilderness where there was no regular synagogue,
      - She kept the Sabbath and worshipped the Lord in this humble little gathering of women.
    - Worshipping of God was important enough to her that she put aside her business affairs each Sabbath even though no one else (hardly) did this in Philippi...she had to go against the mold...
      - And she did this even though she was a seller of purple!
        - As a seller of purple, she would have been dealing with royalty and the elite!
          - They were the only ones that could afford to wear purple!
          - There were two methods for obtaining purple dye...and both were very expensive...
            - One was to extract it from the madder root and the other was to extract it from mollusks.
            - To give an idea of how exclusive this was, it took about 8000 mollusks to get one gram of purple dye!
          - From all indications, she was a very wealthy business woman!
        - But God’s Spirit had begun a work in this lady that each week she laid aside her work and went out by the river to seek the Lord.
  
  - c. Third, you see the evidence of her hunger in that Luke says she *heard us*.
    - The tense in the original indicates that that she kept hearing.
      - She wanted to hear the truth about God!

- This reminds us that *hearing* is God’s ordinary method for conveying the gospel.
  - Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.
  - The Bible emphasises this as the method of the New Testament.
    - Sadly, there are many in our day that discount the place of the preached word.
    - That is what happened in the middle ages when the church became so corrupt and ignorant—
      - Preaching was put aside for theatrics—with robed priests burning incense and mumbling incantations that no one understood and doing actions that no one understood.
  - We emphasise preaching at Covenant Reformed because it is the method God has been pleased to appoint in the New Covenant.
    - This is why we want to expose people, whenever we can find an opening, to the preaching of the word.

TRANS> So you see that Lydia was remarkable—a God-fearer in the wilderness who continued to seek God even when no Jews were around to lead.

- But even an eager seeker like Lydia will not respond to the gospel unless God opens her heart!

3. See how the Lord opens Lydia’s heart!

- It is right there in verse 14...
  - **Acts 16:14: The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.**
- a. The heart, as used in the Bible, does not merely speak of the affections.
  - It refers to the entire inner person—the very core of a person.
    - For example, the Bible says,
      - **“God looks on the heart, but man looks on the outward appearance.”**
    - There are many places where the heart is contrasted with the lips—or with what a person says.
      - In the Bible it is not the contrast between the heart and the head, but between the heart and the outward profession.
- b. Now this saying that her heart was opened tells us that her heart had been closed.
  - You can’t open something unless it is closed,
    - so Lydia, even with all her seeking, was closed to the gospel apart from God’s intervention.
  - Because God’s Spirit was already at work in Lydia, she was actually someone open to God, for she had become a God-fearer as we have seen...



- But she was, but for God's opening her heart, closed to the gospel.
    - Like every other person, it was naturally offensive to her to be told that she was so defiled by sin that it took the Lamb of God,
      - the very Son of God made flesh and crucified,
        - to cleanse her from her sin.
    - That is a message that is too much for anyone to accept.
      - We are, in fact, avowed enemies to God since the fall.
      - We were not created that way, but that is what we became by rebellion.
      - We deny that we are opposed to God—we try our best to deny it—and religious people are the worst!
      - But we all sin and come so short of the glory of God that we must look to Jesus crucified or we cannot be pardoned.
- c. Nothing betrays the wretchedness of the human condition more than the fact that our hearts must be opened before we will heed the gospel.
- Even if we have already been somewhat drawn to the true God as Lydia was, our hearts are closed when it comes to the gospel itself!
    - And yet it is such good news!
      - Good news that the God who created us is so loving that He would go to such lengths as offering His Son to save us!
      - Good news that He has indeed gone to such lengths.
      - Good news that by faith in Christ crucified, we are delivered from everlasting condemnation—just think of it!!!
      - Good news that by Christ crucified, we shall live in the comfortable presence of God, beholding His glory and experiencing His kindness, for all eternity!
    - Yet, the human heart is so desperately wicked that our hearts are totally closed to this glorious gospel unless the Lord, by divine power, opens them!

B. And so you see that salvation is the work of God.

1. The whole world is a barren wilderness apart from His grace!
  - We are totally dead—spiritually dead—unfruitful—dead in our trespasses and sins.
  - Wherever there is spiritual life—
    - wherever the gospel has been received...
    - It is God who has gone before us and given us the increase.
2. Let this motivate us to fervent evangelism and prayer—even in the wilderness!

- We should never despair no matter how hard the hearts around us are because the Lord is the one who opens hearts!
  - This ought to keep us going even when few people are responding!
    - He will give the increase as He sees fit, and it is our task to keep on sowing the seeds.
3. And how we ought to thank Him for His grace as the heart opener!
- Not only has He provided us with a Saviour to atone for our sins...
    - but He also transforms our hard hearts to receive His grace!
  - What debtors we are to His love and mercy!
    - Where would we be without it?

### III. See how God multiplies fruit in the wilderness!

A. It is much like it is in nature...

1. Once the first plant has been established in the desert,
  - other plants begin to appear and soon the whole place is lush and green.
    - God uses one redeemed sinner to beget many more redeemed sinners.
    - That is the way He works.
2. As Paul will later write to the Philippian church,
  - **Phil 1:6: He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ!**
  - It makes such a difference to have an inroad for the gospel—a beginning—a place where life has appeared.
    - How thankful we should be for all the believers who are already in Halifax!
      - Just think how much more difficult it would be to witness in a place where the church was not even planted.
      - Think of some of the missionaries who have spent a whole lifetime without seeing one convert—but have faithfully prepared the way for other missionaries who came after them.
    - How we ought to pray that God will plant His church in places where there is no faithful witness of the gospel!

TRANS> See how God uses Lydia as the firstfruits of Philippi!

B. Lydia is planted and so is her household.

- Verse 15 says that she and her household were baptised.
1. She is planted—baptised—right away...
    - It is stated in a very matter of fact way...
      - **“And when she and her household were baptised...”**
    - a. Baptism is never delayed in the New Testament.

- It is never presented as an option or as something that a person might decide to do at a later time.
    - It is always the first thing.
    - It is a part of one's profession of faith and without it, a person has not really completed his profession.
      - That is why when someone only professes and is not baptised or added to the church, I usually say that they were transformed by the knowledge of Christ.
  - A profession of faith is not really complete until persons have been baptised and added to the church.
    - It is not that a person cannot be saved without water baptism,
      - but rather that wherever the cleansing of sinner has occurred,
        - there the sign also belongs!
      - Peter would not allow that Cornelius should be baptised with the Spirit and not also be baptised with water.
- b. We ought to follow this same practice.
- Baptism should not be delayed for membership classes and such things.
    - As soon as there is a credible profession of faith, there should be baptism.
    - We are to be admitted to baptism and then taught, not taught and then baptised.
2. And note that Lydia also brings her whole household to be baptised.
- a. From all indication, this was no little household!
- I have already mentioned that as a seller of purple, she was probably a very wealthy woman.
    - There is some evidence that there was actually a guild to which the purple sellers belonged which was part of Caesar's household.
    - It gave them a kind of monopoly on the business.
  - What's more, she has the means to offer extended hospitality to four men, and from verse 40 it appears that the newly formed church met in her household.
  - So from all indication, she probably had a household consisting of not a few servants and their families plus her own children.
- b. What this means is that the gospel not only got a foothold in Philippi through an individual woman...
- but through a prominent household.
  - This household would have practically been a church by itself—like the household of Cornelius or the household of Abraham.

- c. Lydia now, as Abraham did, brings her whole household into the covenant with her.
  - When Abraham had his household circumcised, we may assume that the adults were not forced into it,
    - but that as Abraham had taught them the fear of the Lord, they received the word from their esteemed master and were willing to confess the name of the Lord and take God as their God.
    - We know that it was the practice of at least some of the converts to Judaism to dismiss servants who would not convert.
  - God used their connection with their godly master to bring them into His kingdom.
    - And so with Lydia—her household now had the opportunity to receive the gospel and to confess Christ as Lord and Saviour together with their children.
      - The point is that God visits not just individuals, but households with his grace.
      - This does not mean that all of them are always saved, but it does mean that many of them are often saved.
  
- 3. Today in our service, we get to see the fruit of a believing household with Lauren and Sarah having come forth to confess their faith in their father’s God.
  - God took these two young girls into His covenant before they could even speak His name,
    - And He gave their father and mother grace to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,
    - And now here they are, coming forth to confess that the Lord is indeed their God and to take personal responsibility to follow him all the days of their lives.
      - Praise God for His marvellous grace to us and to our households!
      - May we see many more covenant children come forth when they come of age!
  - Understand that even though these girls were brought up in a covenant home,
    - they would no more have embraced the covenant than Lydia if God had not opened their hearts to receive the gospel!
    - It is all of His grace—but it is grace that He has promised to us and to our children.
      - If it were not there, our children would be no more likely to respond to Christ than others.
      - They could hear from their father and mother, but without a special work of the Spirit in their hearts, they would reject it just as readily as anyone else!

- How kind the Lord is to promise that He will work His grace where Covenant parents (by grace) nurture their children in His word of grace.
- If He did not do this, we could no more expect our children to be saved as any other child in the world.

TRANS> So there is a Lydia in the wilderness!

- God has caused the desert to blossom as a rose!
    - Where there was barrenness, now there is fruitfulness at Philippi!
- C. See how her household becomes a life-giving oasis in the desert of Philippi.
- Now there is a green spot in the middle of the barren sand.
    - The water of the Spirit is there to bring life.
1. She opens up her home to lodge all four men!
    - a. Paul was always reluctant to accept support to those he was evangelising.
      - Acts 16:15 indicates that she had to persuade them.
        - **Acts 16:15: And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” So she persuaded us.**
      - She was very insistent...
        - She practically said,
          - “If you will not accept my offer, I will assume that it must be that you do not believe me to be faithful to the Lord.”
        - In this way, she makes it clear that she really wants to help!
    - b. And she did want them to stay!
      - It would be a tremendous blessing to her to provide for these men.
        - It was a way for her to show her gratitude to the Lord for sending them.
        - And what a blessing to have them to teach her and her household each day—to be there to answer all their questions and to help them become rooted and grounded in the faith!
    - c. Do you see how God was using all of this in His providence to establish the foundation of the church in Philippi!
      - Here was a prominent household to serve as a beachhead for the gospel.
        - Again, to be an oasis in the desert where people could come to drink of the water of life.
        - The springs have been opened and the water is starting to flow onto the spiritually parched ground at Philippi.
  2. How God did indeed use this Lydia in the wilderness...
    - a. Paul has a deep affection for this church.

- They become a faithful and influential congregation about which the Apostle says that he gives thanks upon every remembrance of them!
  - **Phil 1:3-5: I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now,**
  - He had no bad memories about them!
- b. It is this church, more than any other that continued to provide financial support to Paul again and again...
  - They would send gifts to him which greatly furthered his ministry.
  - In Philippians 4, Paul thanks them for their generosity to him which he calls:
    - “a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God.”
- 3. This is such a fine expression of Christian love—of Christ-like love!
  - The gospel had so worked in them that they did not have to be prodded to show love...
    - That is how true Christian love always is...
    - It insists on expressing itself—it finds ways to express itself.
      - It eagerly seeks opportunities for doing good.
      - It insists on expressing itself.

### **Conclusion...**

So do not be discouraged if you find yourself in what seems to be a desert!

- The Lord is in the business of making deserts blossom!
- What happened here at Philippi is a beautiful picture of what God did in sending Jesus into this barren world!
  - The whole world was a barren wilderness, dead in sin, lifeless, a veritable desert...
- But God sent His Son to bear fruit in the wilderness!
  - He became the firstfruits of a great worldwide harvest.
  - Through His sacrifice of love to atone for our sins, life has been planted!
    - As we read in Isaiah 35,
      - **Isa 35:1: The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad, And the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose; It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice, Even with joy and singing... They shall see the glory of the LORD, The excellency of our God.**
      - **God... will come and save...**
      - **Isa 35:5-7: Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, And streams in the desert. The parched ground shall become a pool, And the**

**thirsty land springs of water; In the habitation of jackals, where each lay,  
There shall be grass with reeds and rushes.**

May the verdure spread!