

God Opened Her Heart:
An Exegetical Analysis of Lydias Conversion

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Introduction

The book of Acts details the fulfillment of Christ promise in Acts 1:8, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”¹ This paper will offer an analysis of the “Macedonian call” found in chapter 16, specifically of Lydia’s conversion. Commenting on this chapter Benjamin Witherington said

“I have argued elsewhere that Luke chooses representative and notable examples of conversions in each area or geographical region of his region-by-region account of the advance of Christianity. It is no accident that he focuses in 16:11-40 on the conversion of one woman and one man in Philippi.”²

This paper will argue that only God is sovereign over regeneration. It will do this by showing that prior to her encounter with Paul, Lydia was very exposed to Hebrew teaching but was unconverted, as decisively evidenced by her refusal to become a proselyte. Then showing that after God supernaturally opened her heart through Paul’s teaching, she expresses saving faith by repenting of her previous sin and receiving baptism.

The setting

“So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together.”³

¹ The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (ESV) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Acts 1:8

² Benjamin Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009) 487.

³ Acts 16:11-13, ESV.

In the opening words of the chapter Luke provides the setting for the narrative. There is controversy on how to apply Paul's experience to the modern-day time, in reference to this

Bloomberg notes:

“As they seek their next place of ministry, they receive divine guidance both negatively and positively. Luke does not tell us how the Spirit "closed doors"... but what is significant is that Paul did not sit back and wait for special instructions from the Lord before probing all the nearby possibilities... As believers seek God's guidance today, too, they must recognize that he uses a wide variety of ways to communicate with his people. Sometimes it will be by open and closed doors as well, sometimes it will mean more dramatic guidance, and sometimes it will involve simply using sanctified common sense without full assurance that one has made the only possibly correct decision.”⁴

The author writes very pastorally but it is important to note that the experience of those in Acts is not always the same as Christians in the modern day. The events leading Paul to confront Lydia may be common to the Christian experience in some ways, but it is clearly a specific fulfillment of Christ promise in Acts 1:8, to show God's sovereign power to fulfill his promises.

Upon arriving to Philippi readers are greeted by an odd setting that deserves some explanation. Bloomberg again is helpful noting:

“This Roman colony was a popular retirement center for military leaders, but it had almost no Jewish population. Still, Paul is trying to go to the Jews first to form a synagogue, ten male heads of household were needed; apparently Philippi lacked even this small number. In lieu of an indoor meeting place, Jews were to meet out of doors for prayer, preferably by flowing water. Paul, therefore, goes to the river that ran through town and discovers a group of Jewish women gathered there on the Sabbath.”⁵

Though there was no synagogue there was still an expression of the Hebrew church, Kistemaker adds, “Where are the men to conduct the worship service? Consider that about this time, in A.D. 49, Emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome because they had been blamed for

⁴ C.L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts Through Revelation*. (B&H Publishing Group, 2006.) 54-56.

⁵ C.L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos*, 54-56.

creating a religious disturbance (18:2). We surmise that the Roman colony of Philippi had followed Claudius's example and banished the Jews.”⁶ The point is that Paul was looking for Jews to preach the Gospel to, but what he found was a group of women, down by a river, Paul might have been surprised by what he found, but God was not as He was seeking out his people.

The Woman

“One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God.”⁷

Lydia

The subject of this paper is introduced, though very words are given to describe Lydia, much can be learned about her. First on a surface level, “Her name perhaps means simply ‘A woman from the province of Lydia’...as a businesswoman with no husband mentioned”⁸ It is seen that she is a Greek, who is from Lydia, and a businesswoman. Further, “She is said to have been a seller of purple (sc. cloths) from Thyatira...as ancient writers testify, were famous for precisely such fabrics. They possessed that reputation even in Homer's time.”⁹ This woman was more than just a businesswoman, but a high level one at that, and was no doubt very wealthy on account it.

⁶ Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary. Acts: Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1992.) 589.

⁷ Acts 16:14, ESV.

⁸ C.L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos*, 54.

⁹ Horatio Hackett, *Commentary on Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel, 1992.) 186.

Continuing to explore Lydia and moving below the surface it is seen that she is found down by the river due to that fact that she is called a “worshipper of God”. Bruce explains what is meant by that term saying:

“εὐσεβῆς καὶ φοβούμενος τὸν θεὸν ‘pious and God-fearing.’ ... though not strictly technical terms, are used by Luke to denote those Gentiles who, without becoming proselytes... attached themselves in some degree to the Jewish religion, appreciating its monotheistic and imageless worship, attending synagogue, observing the sabbath law and food restrictions.”¹⁰

This woman is a worshiper of Yahweh in some capacity but was not a Jew and was apparently content not to be one. This was apparently common as Burce notes, “Juvenal satirizes this tendency in some areas of Roman society: the father keeps the sabbath and abstains from pork, the son accepts circumcision and becomes a full proselyte.”¹¹ Lydia appears to be interested in the Jewish religion and observes it in part but is not a full participant.

Most modern Christians tend to know very little of this situation of the Jews, the Greeks, the God-fearers and the proselytes which can make understanding this narrative very complex, but some study makes Lydia far easier to understand. A reader needs to know what a proselyte was and the benefits, how to become one, and how it worked for women. First off, there was good reason for a Greek to become a proselyte in part because there were some serious benefits:

“In general, proselytes enjoyed religious equality with native Jews but occasionally a difference of wording was prescribed for them in prayers where the ancestors of Israel were mentioned, e.g., at the presentation of first fruits “the proselyte may bring them but he may not make the avowal [Dt. 26:3] since he cannot say, ‘which the Lord swore to our fathers to give us.’”¹²

¹⁰ Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1990.) 358.

¹¹ Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 358.

¹² Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 118.

Someone who was a foreigner by birth could for all intents and purposes become a Hebrew, but there were some requirements. Bruce again explains:

“προσήλυτος was later employed to denote those Gentiles who undertook to keep the law of Moses and were incorporated into the Jewish religious community. This incorporation was marked by a threefold ceremony: circumcision (for male converts), baptism in water (for ritual purification), and the offering of a sacrifice (while the Jerusalem temple stood).”¹³

For a Gentile to become a Jew they had to fulfill these 3 requirements and those who fulfilled them enjoyed full inclusion into the Jewish people.

There were however some differences between male and female converts. Another writer pointed out, “There is general agreement that the tradition that the male proselyte was required to undergo circumcision and baptism and to offer a sacrifice is trustworthy”¹⁴ For males circumcision was a requirement but, “For women there was no circumcision.”¹⁵ This meant that for some Rabbi’s when teaching on this topic they would focus on “Stressing the fundamental significance of baptism, since it alone was opened to women.”¹⁶ Women were by no means excluded from being proselytes because they could not be circumcised, but in their circumstance the importance of their baptism was increased. In many ways this is expected because:

“No Jew could be admitted into fellowship with Israel except through circumcision, so it was quite as much a matter of course that a gentile, who as such was unclean, should be required, on entering into such fellowship, to take the bath of Levitical purification. Surely everyone in the least acquainted with Pharisaic Judaism must know how frequently a native Jew was compelled to take a bath with a view to Levitical purification

¹³ Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 118.

¹⁴ H.H. Rowley, *From Moses to Qumran: Studies in the Old Testament*, (New York: Association Press, 1963.) 119.

¹⁵ Rowley, *From Moses to Qumran*, 220.

¹⁶ Rowley, *From Moses to Qumran*, 217.

but a Gentile, not being in the habit of observing those regulations with regard to Levitical purity, what is such be unclean and that as a simple matter of course.”¹⁷

Of course, the ceremonially unclean would need to be cleansed, but it was far more, “It was... not an act of ritual purification alone, but an act of self-dedication to the God of Israel, involving spiritual factors as well as physical, with a fundamentally sacramental character.”¹⁸ This was a ceremony of cleansing, but it was also a ceremony of commitment and inclusion for all those who partook. For female converts the spiritual weight of Baptism was drastically elevated since they avoided the physical pain of circumcision, and it was intentionally done so that those who were not truly converted, would not partake of the sacrament. For those that were convinced that Yahweh was the true God worthy of worship there was a way for them to become his people, and for women in some senses it was easier to join than men, and the benefits of joining were great.

Lydias problem

Lydia being a God-fearer presents a problem, and the problem is that she for some reason was unwilling to become an Israelite. It is understandable that some men who became convinced of the Hebrew religion would keep themselves back from full inclusion on account of the physical pain, Bruce notes, “Because of the circumcision requirement for men, they seem to have been considerably outnumbered by women proselytes... Many men were content with that looser attachment to the synagogue implied in the nontechnical term "God-fearers".¹⁹ But Lydia did not have to shed her blood to join, yet something held her back. Even though she engaged in Hebrew worship in some sense, she refused to receive the sign of inclusion into the Visible Church. This refusal was likely influenced by the fact that her baptism carried such spiritual

¹⁷ Rowley, *From Moses to Qumran*, 212-213.

¹⁸ Rowley, *From Moses to Qumran*, 225.

¹⁹ Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 118.

significance that she was intimidated by it and her refusal to take the decisive step to fully join the Hebrews is evidence that she was not yet converted, but what is more convincing evidence is that after her heart is opened, she does take that decisive step.

The Interaction

“The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”²⁰

What Paul was doing

Lydias character has been established which leads into the interaction with Paul itself. It was not stated what Paul was doing, but it can be safely assumed based on what he normally did, “As his custom’ was another Lukan touch. The phrase occurs again only in Luke 4:16, a most interesting parallel For St. Paul's custom.”²¹ Walker points to Lukes’s connection to how both Jesus and Paul made it their practice to enter a town, enter their synagogue and preach there from the scriptures. In Acts 17 Paul does that very thing:

“In this city the missionaries entered, and Paul at once sought out the synagogue. This was his custom. For three Sabbath days, but more correctly as the margin has it, weeks, he ministered the Word to the Jews. And now we have before us a very interesting record. ‘He reasoned with them out of (from) the Scriptures, opening and alleging that Christ must have needs suffered and risen again from the dead: and that this Jesus (he said) whom I preach unto you is Christ.’”²²

Paul in his teachings, “had one theme, the Gospel of Grace, and of this and the Lord Jesus Christ, His death on the cross and His resurrection he assuredly spoke.”²³ He was undoubtedly preaching the message of Christ life death and resurrection for sinners.

²⁰Acts 16:14, ESV.

²¹ Thomas Walker. *Acts of the Apostles*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel Publications, 1984.) 393.

²² A.C. Gaebelein, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Exposition*. (New York, New York: “Our Hope,” 1912.) 297.

²³ Gaebelein, *The acts of the apostles*, 285.

What God was Doing

But God was also at work through Paul. Luke intentionally points out that Lydia “heard” Paul, Walker notes “The imperfect tense points to her sustained attention. It may mean that she became a regular hearer.”²⁴ She was simply listening to preaching, like she had done previously, “And then the Lord opened the heart of Lydia, what a blessed word this is.”²⁵ On this idea of opening Alexander says, “Opened her heart (i.e. disposed the understanding and affections) to attend (apply the mind, but often in the classics with the accessory notion of believing, giving credence)”²⁶ God was both opening her heart to understand and working faith in her soul to believe. Witherington notes that it, “indicates that it was the Lord who opened her heart to listen eagerly to the gospel taught by Paul and so be converted.”²⁷ Not that Paul’s words were particularly winsome this time, but that God was at work. Kistemaker puts it well when he says:

“The exalted Christ prepared Lydia through the synagogue teaching of the Old Testament. Now he sent Paul and the other missionaries to Philippi so that Lydia was able to hear the message of salvation. Luke ascribes to the Lord, not to Paul, the act of saving Lydia. Salvation, then, is not man's work but the Lord's. Not the word itself, but the Lord himself (Luke 24:45), opens the human heart.”²⁸

Luke isn’t pointing to Paul’s brilliance rather:

“Luke clearly teaches that salvation is the work of the Lord, for he saves his people according to his eternal plan... Salvation originates with God. Thus, the Lord opened Lydia's heart.... John Albert Bengel Concludes, ‘The heart is in itself closed, but it is the prerogative of God to open it.’ In Greek, Luke employs different verb tenses to emphasize God's work in salvation. In this translation, the changes in tense are italicized:

²⁴ Walker, *Acts of the Apostles*, 379.

²⁵ Gaebelein, *The acts of the apostles*, 285.

²⁶ J. A. Alexander *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980.) 112.

²⁷ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 493.

²⁸ Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary*, 590.

‘While Lydia continued to listen, God *once for all* opened her heart *to have her apply her mind to the things* that were being said by Paul.’ Conclusively, God is the author of her salvation.”²⁹

The very language Luke is using here makes the argument. “Verse 14: The sequence of Greek tenses is unique and purposeful ἤκουεν (imperfect: she kept listening), διήνοιξεν (aorist: [the Lord] opened), and προσέχειν (present infinitive of purpose: to pay attention to).”³⁰ She was listening passively in an ongoing sense, but it was God that opened her heart in a passionate, involved life changing way by the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit once and for all, in the past.

What God always does

The idea of God opening the heart is not isolated to Acts 16. The verb here translated as opened is found in other places, “The verb is a compound one, ‘completely opened’. It is used of ears (Mark 7:34-5), eyes (Luke 24:31), scriptures (Luke 24:32, Acts 17:3), mind (Luke 24:45), and the heart (Acts 16:14).”³¹ All reinforcing the same idea that God alone is sovereign over salvation.

This verb is used in Luke as the term opened on the road to Emmaus:

“Through Jesus' interpretation of the Scriptures (Luke 24:27), the disciples came to understand its teaching concerning his death and resurrection. This new understanding contrasts with their earlier lack of understanding (9:45; 18:34). The disciples' new understanding of the necessity of Jesus' death and resurrection was not achieved through their own study of the Scriptures. What was involved was not a new hermeneutic or method of interpretation. Rather this understanding was given them by Jesus. Paul was

²⁹ Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary*, 591.

³⁰ Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary*, 592.

³¹ Walker. *Acts of the Apostles*, 379.

later commissioned to open people's eyes (Acts 26:17-18) through preaching and interpreting the Scriptures (17:2-3).”³²

The disciples walked with Christ, and heard his teaching verbally! Yet it was not enough. Ryken continues saying,

“Yet they still did not understand! When Jesus appeared to them after his resurrection, they thought they were seeing a ghost (Luke 24:37), not a living Savior. Somehow, they were still missing something. What made the difference for these disciples? How did they ever start trusting in the cross and believing in the empty tomb? Luke tells us that Jesus "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45; cf. 24:32). What these men needed what everyone needs is the mind opening work of God... It takes a work of God for anyone to know Jesus in a saving way. The Bible says that "the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned"(1 Cor. 2:14). It does not matter how smart we are, we will never understand the message of God's salvation unless and until God enables us to understand it.”³³

This is substantial, even in the disciples lives this opening needed to take place.

Not only did Christ do this for his disciples but he commissioned Paul to do the same after he left. In Acts 26 Paul is recounting his conversion Paul uses the word to explain his commission which was to go to “Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light”³⁴ It is:

“Important to observe the relation of the different clauses to each other. ‘To open their eyes’ states the object of ‘send’. ‘That they may turn’ derives its subject from ‘their’. The verb is intransitive (see v. 20; 14:15), not active, ‘in order to turn them’ This clause states the designed effect of the illumination which they should receive. ‘That they may obtain forgiveness of sin’s expresses the direct object of the second infinitive and the ultimate object of the first.”³⁵

³² Robert Stein, *The New American Commentary Volume 24 – Luke*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1993.) 620.

³³ Philip Ryken, *Luke: 2 Volume Set*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009.) 681-682.

³⁴ Acts 26:17-18, ESV.

³⁵ Hackett, *Commentary on Acts*, 286.

Jesus came opening the eyes of the blind, and Jesus worked through Paul to continue to do the same after he departed from this world, In a sense Christ came to “open.” It is seen even more clearly in 1 John 5:20, “First, he has given us a ‘mind’ (dianoia)... That God has given us a dianoia suggests that it is a new dianoia, a new heart or a renewed mind (see Rom 12:2), a mind to know the one who is true.”³⁶ Furthermore we know that “he has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true. The understanding which the Son of God gives is knowledge of God the Father himself.”³⁷ Jesus’ work was to come to us to reveal himself to those who could not see, and he used Paul to do the same, this is Gods prerogative through all the scriptures.

Lydias response

“And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us.”³⁸

Once again it must be remembered that prior to this encounter Lydia had refused to partake of baptism however, God opened her heart and, “She was baptized. Apparently without any delay.”³⁹ Once regenerated She immediately responds by doing, the very thing she had refused to do, she receives the sign of inclusion in the visible church. Just as all who are redeemed are called to be, “They were to be baptized, i.e., as the sign and token that they accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord... baptism is the divinely appointed sacrament in

³⁶ Painter, *John. 1, 2, and 3 John: Sacra Pagina Series*, (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002.) 325.

³⁷ Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*. (Leicester, England: Apollos, 2000.) 196.

³⁸ Acts 16:15, ESV.

³⁹ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: Explanatory and Practical Acts*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1977.) 241.

which such faith is publicly expressed.”⁴⁰ This is decisive change and is proof that her heart is changed, and she is saved.

Furthermore, she provides more evidence for this conversion in,

“Verse 15: παρεκάλεσεν from παρακαλέω (I beseech), the aorist tense implies insistence. Lydia insisted, as is evident from the aorist verb παρεβιάσατο (she urged strongly). I.e. this particle, followed by the perfect indicative κεκρίκατε (if you have judged) is the protasis of a simple-fact condition. Lydia confidently expresses reality.”⁴¹

In case anyone doubt her salvation,

“Lydia made the missionaries' acceptance of her hospitality the test of whether they really believed she had become a believer, ‘Come and see for yourself if the Lord has come to rule in my life’ (author's paraphrase). It was an offer they could not refuse. But she did not merely open her home to the missionaries; she allowed it to become the gathering place for the entire Christian community (v. 40). Perhaps the wealthiest member of the Philippian church, Lydia embraced the ideal of the early church, not laying claim to what was hers but freely sharing it with her sisters and brothers in Christ (4:32).”⁴²

This was Lydia’s decisive expression of saving faith, both in her baptism and her opening of her home. Lydia, upon having her heart opened, is redeemed and her changed life stands as proof of her saving faith.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that that only God is sovereign over regeneration. It did this by showing that prior to her encounter with Paul, Lydia was very exposed to Hebrew teaching but was not saved, as decisively evidenced by her refusal to join the church. Yet after meeting with

⁴⁰ Walker. *Acts of the Apostles*, 84.

⁴¹ Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary*, 592.

⁴² Polhill, John B. *Acts. The New American Commentary*. (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman, 1992.) 349-350.

Paul, and God opening her heart, she expresses saving faith by repenting of her previous sin and receiving baptism.

This is indeed evident and should be an encouragement and a challenge to all ministers of the Gospel and Christians who desire to see people come to faith. God called Paul to the task of preaching and promised that he would see fruit. Paul never saved anyone, and yet God worked through Paul's message, just as he promises to work through his word taught today. May all who preach the gospel rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to awaken dead hearts and preach boldly to that end. Yet it ought to be a challenge because there is a tendency among preachers to become prideful when they see fruit from their teaching. Thinking that in some way that they have contributed to the fruit they see. Yet the Gospel is only made effectual when God desires it to be. The truth is God will redeem his people, with or without an individual's actions. All who are called to preach should not be prideful over their fruit, but should praise God for allowing them to take part in this work.

"I, Jacob Neiderhiser have written this paper exclusively for NT630. If this paper, in part or full, was submitted previously in another context, I have received permission from the course professor to use it for this assignment. While I may have received editing or proofreading advice, I made all corrections myself. I have properly cited each paraphrase, quotation, and borrowed idea in compliance with A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations (9th edition) and the RPTS Style Guide."

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