

When God Opens Our Hearts

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Acts 16:11-15

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

*When God has
opened your
heart, what
has been your
response?*

When has God opened your heart? It could have been a lightning-bolt, Saul-Falling-Off-His-Horse kind of heart-opening. It could have been in worship right here in this sanctuary, or over a long weekend with other friends at summer camp. It could have been in the solitude of the night, just God's heart and your heart becoming one. Or, it could have been over the peaks and valleys of a season in your life, when God was steadily, gracefully opening your heart to His Love.

When God has opened your heart, what has been your response? What has been your "thank offering," your response of gratitude? Let this End-Of-Summer-Service Sunday be a thank-offering, your grateful response to God Opening Your Heart.

This morning, we're going to look at God opening Lydia's heart—a God-worshipping, wealthy Gentile businesswoman. And we're going to look at Lydia's grateful response.

This week in God's Big Story, we are in chapter 16 of the Acts of the Apostles, specifically, Paul's Traveling Gospel Road Show. This is Paul's second missionary journey, some three years after his first journey ended, just 10 years

after Paul met Jesus alive. He is now traveling with Silas, Timothy, Luke (mostly on land, less on sea). It is exciting. Paul and company are heading ever-westward, deeper into Gentile territory. They have now reached into Macedonia (into modern day northern Greece), farther westward onto what is now the continent of Europe. ¹¹"So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; and from there [the 10 miles north and west] to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days."

Luke the narrator continues, ¹³"And on the Sabbath day, we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled."

It's the first day of the week in Philippi. Paul and friends have gone outside the city and down to the river (the Gangites River) looking for a "prayer meeting." They find a prayer meeting of women, of all things. Where are the men? Fishing? Golfing? Maybe worshipping somewhere else. Women are gathered, most certainly reciting the She-ma (the first and greatest command—to love God with all your

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Jesus wants to
live in you!
Jesus wants to
fill you with
Himself!***

heart, soul, and might!), and praying, and discussing the Hebrew laws and prophets.

Here is a truth about the 1st Century Church and still today: the Gospel is for anyone, anywhere, any time. Inside the city gates, or outside on the margins; by the river, under bridges, in the parks or coffeeshops; in converted warehouses or living rooms; inside the church, outside the church, the Gospel is for anyone, anywhere, any time. The Gospel counters Roman culture in Philippi. The Gospel counters American culture outside the Capital Beltway. The poor and the wealthy together are welcome in Jesus' community. Men and women, the enslaved and free together are welcome in Jesus' community. Paul, the Jew, and Cornelius, the Gentile, are night-and-day different. Lydia, the wealthy businesswoman, and (later, in chapter 16) the demon-possessed, poor slave girl are night and day different. But they all are welcome and together in Jesus' Kingdom-community.

Men, women, boys, girls—when you are out doing your ESS project this afternoon, remember that the Gospel is for anyone, anywhere, any time. When you are visiting at the jail today, or working at the shelter; when you are with that lonely, older adult in her apartment today; when you are cleaning up that yard for your neighbor; or meeting folks on the W&OD Trail today, remember, the Gospel is for anyone, anywhere, any time!

At some point, Paul begins to teach, to exhort, to bless. Lydia

becomes the first European convert for Christ: ¹⁴“A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.’ And she prevailed upon us.”

God “opens Lydia’s heart.” It is the work of God and God’s Spirit, you know, not Paul’s skill or charisma. God uses Paul mightily, but it is all God’s doing.

So what is it, do you suppose, that the Holy Spirit says to Lydia through Paul on that Sabbath morning? Maybe something like this: People of God, being with you this morning, it is evident that you are people who worship the one true God. Yet, I testify today that there is more! Hear this, The Messiah has come—God in flesh and blood and bone! He has come. This Lord, He loves you completely. He loves you so deeply that He was beaten, bruised, broken on a Roman cross to save you from yourselves. Because of the cross, He can take your sin-infested life and wash you clean. This Savior can take your old life and give you a new life. It is like being newly-born, all over again! His name is Jesus. He is the Christ. He is like the Lamb who is sacrificed. He was put to death. He rose up from being dead, and He is alive. And I know this is true! I, Paul, myself, met the Risen Jesus face-to-face. I have never been the same since! Jesus lives. Jesus wants to

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live in you! Jesus wants to fill you with Himself! Maybe your life seems comfortable. (Maybe right here, Paul is looking directly into Lydia's eyes) Maybe you're living a full and satisfying life, Lydia—but there is much more! You have a “home” here. But Jesus the Messiah has a “spiritual home” for you, for all eternity! Let Him in. Open your life to Jesus, and you will have a life like never before!

Listening to Paul, Lydia's heart opens. God does it. When God opens her heart, Lydia responds with gratitude and gladness. It is a *Hinnainee* Response. “Here I Am, Lord, SEND me!” Lydia immediately opens up her home and welcomes Paul and his friends in. Lydia immediately demonstrates one of the highest Christian qualities—hospitality, *Hinnainee* Hospitality. The ultimate character of a Christian, Paul writes later to his friends in Rome (perhaps because he was so richly blessed by it in Philippi), is the one who is “given to hospitality” (Romans 12:13).

At the start of the day, Paul and Silas are complete strangers to Lydia. But now, with an Open Heart, they are Lydia's friends! She welcomes them into her life.

And what is your response when God opens your heart? To offer yourselves – your hospitality. To step out and to welcome people into Jesus' life through your life! God has been, again and again, hospitable to us. It is right for us to be hospitable to God's people. God pays the price of loving us, forever and always. Our best

response, then, is to PAY IT FORWARD by loving others, in the Way of Jesus. To Pay It Forward.

Do you remember that movie in 2000, *Pay It Forward*? A child shall lead them, remember? The boy-actor, Joel Osment, plays the 11-year-old Trevor MacKinney, and he explains to his classmates and his teacher (played by Kevin Spacey) that “you do a favor that really helps someone, and then you tell him or her NOT to pay it back, but instead to pay it forward to three other people who, in turn, each pay it forward to three more people.” *Hinnainee*. Hospitality, big time!

Talk about hospitality? We're going to be fed at His TABLE soon. What hospitable, saving love! Jesus invites us to His Table, into His life. Think of what Jesus offers us: forgiveness, healing, joy, communion. We're going to be leaving this place soon. What an opportunity to be a loving, welcoming presence to others for Christ. Jesus, in John's gospel, says it all for us this day: “By this [gift of love and grace] everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”(John 13:35). You Pay It Forward with love for others, in the Way of Jesus. Because when, anywhere any time, you open your heart to somebody, then Jesus lives. But the moment you shut your heart down in some way, then Jesus dies a little. It is that fragile and that crucial an act.

Serving Jesus is not always simple or easy. Loving our neighbors is not always simple or easy. But for us who are “little Christs,” it is required. If we are able to help

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those in need but choose not to, God weeps. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that gives Lydia, and Paul, and you and me the strength to love others. The powerful witness of the Savior, the Messiah, who loves us now and for all eternity, gives us the strength to be sent forth to do His loving work out into the World.