



LYDIA

by Diane Jacobson

OF MANY GENERATIONS:
MARY, ELIZABETH, AND LYDIA

BIBLE STUDY : SESSION 3

Theme verse

“Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” Isaiah 58:12

Introduction

Our final story takes us to a different book with its own story of raising up the foundations of many generations. In Acts 16:11–15 we meet both Lydia and the group of women with whom she gathers down by the river as well as Paul and his companion who encounter them there.

Digging In

Once again we gather as a company of women committed, as we have been saying as a Book of Faith church, to opening Scripture together and joining the conversation. This session’s opening prayer reflects this commitment.

Prayer

God of Grace, this day we come to the study of your word. May we come prayerfully asking that the Holy Spirit might guide our study and that Christ might be among us. May we come humbly, asking for the gift of faith and ever mindful of our own capacity for sin and self-deceit. May we come mindfully, bringing to our study the gifts of reason, the tools of scholarship, and the insights of others. May we come attentively, reading Scripture carefully and closely. May we come expectantly, listening for the voice of God working through the text to inspire, shape, and enliven us individually and as a community of faith, letting our own

stories interact with the stories of the Bible. May we be deeply enriched by our conversations as we engage and are engaged by the Bible again and again. And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us all as we walk together with the Spirit on the journey to which God is calling us. Amen.

Hymn

“Shall We Gather by the River?” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 423)

Questions to Ponder

1. Our first slightly altered set of questions centers around reading the text in Acts devotionally. What word or phrase strikes you, and where does it take you? What images or stories or memories come to mind? What confuses or challenges you? What touched your heart with hope or fear?
2. As you think about the two major characters in our story, Lydia and Paul, consider what gifts they give each other. Make a list of gifts you have given or received that are like the gifts they give to each other.

Exploring the Historical Context

As we read the story about Paul and Lydia, certain details invite us to an awareness that the action is happening at a particular time and place in history. What insights from history would be helpful to know in order to hear, read, study, or understand our passage more accurately?

Historical Exercise

Rather than simply reading about the historical context, let’s begin by thinking about what we would like to

know. To help us do this, take out your pencil and your Bible and turn to Acts 16:11–15. Pretend you are in charge of telling a scholar where you would like him or her to put notes in an upcoming study Bible. Now put an asterisk wherever you would want a note. Compare notes. Why do you want to know these things?

Here are some questions you might have asked with some answers or some directions about where to find better answers.

Where is Philippi and what kind of city was it?

Did you put an asterisk at verse 12 which indicates that our story takes place in “Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony?” If you look at a map you discover that Philippi was a port city at the northern tip of the Aegean Sea in Macedonia. Perhaps your study note would tell you other interesting facts. Philippi was a very cosmopolitan colonized Roman town. It was one of the trade centers of the time.

One scholar broke down the population as one-third Roman, two-thirds locals and immigrants. Of those, 3 percent were upper class, 20 percent slaves, and 20 percent poor. Within the city walls were many places of worship—temples to a great variety of gods. The shops were full of luxury items for the wealthy.

What about Thyatira?

You probably noticed that Lydia was not from Philippi. She came from the south, about 50 kilometers (31 miles) east of the Aegean Sea (modern Turkey), from the trade city called Thyatira.

Thyatira was a Greek influenced Asian city that had also been a Roman colony for 150 years. Like Philippi, Thyatira was urban, a prosperous city of trade and industry. It was the center of the purple dye industry, and the region as a whole was called Lydia.

Purple cloth was a very valuable material in the ancient world. The rich and famous would have worn togas trimmed with purple.

Just for fun: Purple Pause

Pause at this point and share the purple objects or clothing folks brought with them. What does the color purple mean to each person present and why? Share your stories.

What do we know about status of women and foreigners in Philippi during the time of Paul?

Some historical questions cannot be answered by looking at a map. We might want to know more about social realities in the distant past. The status of women and foreigners in the Roman Empire in a trade town are two of those social realities about which we know much and speculate more. Roman women were normally under the authority of a man—her father, husband, or brother. So Lydia seems unusual. Perhaps she was divorced or widowed. Perhaps she was a freed slave. We know there were lots of women in clothes production. So how can we begin to imagine her life?

And what was thought about foreigners? What was the attitude toward non-Roman immigrants? In the story after Lydia, Paul and his friends were thought of as trouble-making Jews disturbing the city and interrupting business (Acts 16:20–22).

Questions to Ponder

3. Consider the places where you live. How are they like or unlike the ancient cities of Philippi or Thyatira? What are the various attitudes toward women and foreigners? How do the differences and similarities affect your reading of the story?

Exploring the Literary Context, Setting, and Characters

As we discovered in our first two sessions, we understand a story more fully when we see it in its place in the larger story. You might want to tell one another what you know about the Book of Acts. Our story takes place on the second of Paul’s missionary journeys found in Acts 15:40–18:23. The story about Paul’s encounter with Lydia is matched right afterward with

a story about his encounter with a possessed slave girl and his eventual imprisonment with Silas (Acts 16:16-40) which ends with the only other reference to Lydia:

After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.

A wonderful way to explore any biblical story is to consider what we are told about when and where things happen. What settings are we asked to imagine?

Literary Exercises

Take out your pencil and your copy of Acts 16:11-15 once again. Beginning with verse 13, underline any indications of time and place.

The one time indication in the story is in verse 13 where we are told that all the action takes place on the Sabbath. What happens when you hear this? We now listen with an ear to a Jewish setting. We know that Sabbath is a day set apart, a day of prayer and worship rather than work. We imagine that Paul who is a Jew is looking for a place to worship. So where do you imagine he would look for such a place?

Perhaps other ideas about sabbath from various parts of the Bible also ring in our ears. Sabbath invites us to think about equality—everyone from land and animals to rulers and servants ceases from work. Sabbath throughout Scripture invites us to consider God's tendency toward mercy and healing. Sabbath helps to form community identity.

Question to Ponder

4. How does sabbath function in your life and the life of your community? How and where do you look for a place of worship when you are traveling?

Back to our exercise

What were the indications of place that you marked? Three places stand out. First, in verse 13, Paul with his companions begins by going through the gate. Second,

they go down to the river "where we supposed there was a place of prayer." And third, in verse 15, they are invited by Lydia to her home.

The Gate

5. Picture a city gate. What is its purpose? Does it protect and defend? Does it keep out or keep in? Does it invite? Is it a meeting place?

Closed gates keep some people out and some people in. Inside the gate is the city, civilization, and safety.

For Paul and his friends, the gate is open. They begin by walking through the gate.

When you step through an open gate, a new world of possibilities appears. Going outside the gate involves risk. But it also opens us up to the future and new possibilities. When the gate is open, our eyes see, our ears hear, and our mouths speak.

The River

6. What goes on at a river? We are told that the women are gathered there. We know without being told that generations of women have gathered by rivers. We picture them washing clothes, forming community, passing on wisdom from mother to daughter and older residents to newcomers, "raising up the foundations of many generations."

Have you ever noticed that all through Scripture women are found by the water? Women gather at wells like Rebekah (Genesis 24) and Zipporah (Exodus 2) and the Samaritan woman (John 4). Women are found by rivers like Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter (Exodus 2). And women like Miriam sing victory songs by the sea (Exodus 15). When Miriam dies (Numbers 20), the water dries up! So we are not surprised when Paul finds women gathered by the river. Think about the river in our story. The women are gathered outside the safety of the city gate. Paul supposed this gathering place to be a place of prayer. That is, Paul supposed

God was already there. Here was a mission field where people were already praying, where they were already gathered in community, where they already knew something of God.

What happens next at the river? The river becomes the place of gospel proclamation and conversation. The words are spoken and heard and discussed. The conversation between Paul and Lydia blossoms and bears fruit beside this river. The place of gathering and prayer is transformed by God's word.

And then the river becomes the place of baptism. This place outside the gate now becomes the fountain of faith and community. The outside waters become the source of life. Water is transformed by the Spirit to effect the rebirth of Lydia and her household.

They die with Christ to be raised to new life, and Paul and Lydia and her household are joined together in a new community: rich and poor, male and female, Jew and Gentile. Insiders become outsiders, and outsiders become insiders. All become one in this baptism into Christ. But we have yet one more place.

The Home

The home is the final place of our story. In verse 15, Lydia invites Paul and his companions to stay at her home. Now here is a place that generations of women know intimately. The home is where we establish families and nurture children. The home is the place of hospitality and fellowship. Is the home also a place where we provide rest for the weary, clothes for the naked, and food for the hungry?

We are reminded of all of the first gatherings in the early church. They all took place in homes. The home was the place of fellowship—the fellowship of the gathered and the fellowship of the table. The home is where they fed each other in body and in soul, and where, in turn, they were fed by Christ. And we know that Lydia's home becomes such a place because after Paul and Silas leave prison, they went to Lydia's home

where they knew they would find their fellow Christians, gathered there (Acts 16:40).

Exercise and Questions to Ponder

7. Divide into small groups. Think of each of these three places: the gate, the river, and the home. Talk about these places in your life. Tell stories. Think of where these places are found in the Bible, and why are they important. What is their symbolic value? Tell stories.
8. Think about these places in your congregations and communities. Tell stories. How does thinking about these places help to deepen your reading of the story of Lydia and Paul?

Exploring the Characters

We are not yet done with literary questions. All biblical stories, all stories really, center on people. In our story, we are invited to consider Paul and Lydia.

Paul

9. Think about what Paul does and says. What are his main characteristics?

Paul begins by venturing outside the gate, outside the city. He doesn't go alone. He has Timothy and Silas with him. He actually speaks with women; many men would probably not bother with that. He doesn't go to the elite leaders of the city.

Paul was thinking only of what he was called to do. He was called to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. What better place to go than to those women gathered to pray, ripe for the message. Paul proclaims the gospel. We don't know if he preached or had a conversation. We do not even have his words. What we know is that though Paul speaks to Lydia, the Lord opens her heart. The Lord is the subject of the action, calling both the one who is speaking and the one who is listening. Paul became God's instrument of proclamation.

Paul begins by going outside the gate, but he ends

inside the home. Going to Lydia's home was perhaps as great a risk as leaving the gate in the first place. She was a woman unattached to a man, and she was a foreigner. Paul's openness to receive Lydia's invitation and her willingness to extend it creates this new community.

Lydia

10. And what of Lydia? Think about what she does and says.

What are her main characteristics?

Lydia is complicated. As a woman and a foreigner, she stands outside the center of power, outside the gates. She is associated with her work—a dealer in purple cloth.

Some have speculated that Lydia might have been a dye worker. That's possible. But she seems to own her own home. So most likely she was a wealthy business woman, and, given her independence, possibly a widow. As a wealthy trader and head of a household, she would have had power and substance. So Lydia was both an outsider and an insider.

What else do we know of Lydia? We know she gathered with the women at the river. She was part of a community. We learn that she was a worshiper of God. Quite possibly she was one of the many Gentiles already attracted to Judaism. And we learn that Lydia hears.

She has her heart opened by God through Paul. And then she is baptized. These things we learn create a powerful picture. An independent woman who is faithful, willing to be changed, and eager to hear what God is calling her to do.

After her baptism, Lydia has voice. She is the only one whose words we hear in the story: "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." Having had her heart opened, Lydia finds it insufficient only to receive. She had been given a gift, and so she offers a gift in return: hospitality.

Lydia, like Paul, is open to risk. She lets herself be formed by the transforming reality of God's saving

word. And in the end, she asks to be judged not by her status nor by her wealth nor by her gender, but only by her faithfulness to the Lord. Such faithfulness and hospitality leads in turn to the transforming of all future generations. Her home in Philippi becomes the heart of the Philippian church to whom Paul later writes:

"I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:3–4).

Questions to Ponder

11. Imagine yourselves as Paul or Lydia. How do they feel? What might they be thinking? In what ways are you like or unlike either one? Who are the Pauls and Lydias in your life? Return to your gift list. Would you expand or change the gifts Paul and Lydia give to one another? And what of your own gifts?

Wrapping Up

Re-read our theme verse for this summer study—Isaiah 58:12. We have looked together at two stories of encounter that have served to raise up the foundations of countless generations. Their encounters with each other becomes an invitation to all of us. How shall we become those who raise up the foundations of many generations? What breaches shall we repair, what streets restore together?

12. Looking back at the stories and songs of Mary and Elizabeth and the story of Lydia and Paul, what three things stand out that might encourage us to follow their examples? Gather your thoughts together and form them into one final blessing and prayer. 🌿

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Digging In

Begin with the prayer offered in the magazine.

For this session we will move through three of the four ways of asking questions commended by the Book of Faith Initiative. (www.bookoffaith.org/biblemethods.html). Make certain everyone has a copy of the passage, paper for making a wish list, and a pen. A good handout can be found online at gathermagazine.org, click on Bible studies/2014 summer study.

Exploring the Historical Context

You might remind the group that the author of the Gospel of Luke also wrote the Book of Acts. You can find many good books introducing you to Acts. For our passage, a particularly good source is Richard S. Ascough's book, *Lydia: Paul's Cosmopolitan Hostess* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2009). He talks about it being a collectivist culture rather than an individualist like ours.

Philippi and Thyatira

You can find helpful maps at enterthebible.org.

Purple Pause

Some might think of purple as the color of royalty. On the other hand, for many of us in the church purple is the color of Lent. The color purple reminds us that our king is a suffering king.

The Status of Women

Ascough has a good deal to say about the status of women in the Roman Empire. They were definitely not liberated! Emperor Augustus passed a law that made it possible for some women to have more money. Hence Lydia's status.

Exploring the Literary Context, Setting, and Characters

The exercises, observations, and questions that are explored in this section come from reading our story as literature and paying close attention to how the text is written. When we look at details, characters, and themes, and when we compare and contrast these with our own understanding and experience of life, we often discover new meanings.

Online at gathermagazine.org you will find an additional handout "Tips for Reading Biblical Narrative" that can offer some background.

Context

When you read Acts, you notice that Luke describes three missionary journeys taken by Paul. Our story takes place during the second missionary journey. You can find out more about these journeys by exploring sites on the web such as Maps of Paul's missionary journeys at <http://tinyurl.com/jet9o>.

If you have time, compare the story of Paul's encounter with Lydia with a story about his encounter with a possessed slave-girl that follows in Acts 16:16–24. What details draw these two stories together?

Paul and Lydia

There are many ways to capture the various characters in a story. You can notice who has name, voice, and action. These are most often the central characters. You can notice what they say and what is said about them.

Wrapping Up

A fine way to end is to note at least one insight from each participant and to offer personal prayers and blessings.