

Lydia Responds to Christ
Acts 16:9-15
May 8, 2022

Happy Mother's Day! As a holiday Mother's Day may not be at the top of our list. It is true that it is not Christmas, or Easter or the Fourth of July, but it is surprising to find out that it rates high on the list of family importance. A study by VIP Communications, a U.S. based international calling firm showed that: Mother's Day regardless of what day it is and it varies from country to country "is far and away the most important day to place phone calls across the world receiving more phone calls than any other holiday." (1) A survey by OOMA a national home phone service showed that: "9 out of 10 mothers agree that adult children do not need to spend money on them for Mother's Day--a simple phone call is enough." (2) Mothers would much rather hear the voice of a son or daughter than receive a gift on Mother's Day. So, if you can make sure you tell your mother that you love her today.

The Bible mentions just before our scripture that Paul and his companions Silas and Timothy were traveling through Phrygia and Galatia in what is today southern Turkey. It may seem strange but Paul was barred by the Holy Spirit from going north and entering Asia. (Acts 16:6) We are not told why, but it may be because of ill health. "During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" (Acts 16:9) After the vision Paul made ready to go to Macedonia because he knew it was there that God wanted him to preach. Who was this man? Some think that it was Luke, the author of the books of Luke and Acts. In verse 10 of our scripture there appears the little word "us" and in verse 11 "we." It is at this point that the story of Acts begins to be told not in the third person but in the first person. And "that tells us that Luke was there, an eye-witness and a companion of Paul. Why should he suddenly emerge on the scene? What was Luke? Luke was a doctor." (3) If an illness had kept Paul from ministering further north into Asia, he may have needed Luke's medical care. Luke, who was a Gentile in the process of joining the Jewish faith, writes that he joined the others in Troas and in a few days, they made their way to Philippi a city in eastern Macedonia. Luke became one of Paul's best friends. He joined Paul in 51 A.D. and was with him off and on until 67 A.D. when he was executed during emperor Nero's reign. Paul writes that Luke was the only one who remained while he was in prison awaiting execution. (2 Timothy 4:11)

Philippi was a Roman colony named after Philip II, father of Alexander the Great. As a colony it "was independent of provincial administration and had a governmental organization modeled after that of Rome." (4) It was a rich city being located in the gold

producing area of Macedonia and was the residence of many retired Roman soldiers who had settled there, because they could enjoy “rights legally equivalent to those of Italian cities.” (5) As a cultural and commercial center, Philippi was active and alive. It seems to have been a nice place to live. There was one thing that was missing however. Philippi didn’t have a synagogue. Luke writes that they were there several days before the arrival of the Sabbath. During that time, they would have inquired as to where the synagogue was. Reverend Matt Hoffman says, “and the response they got, I imagine, more often than not was, ‘What’s a synagogue?’ And even if they knew, they probably wouldn’t have said anything. Just a short while earlier, the Roman emperor Claudius had expelled all of the Jews from Rome. And if there was one thing the Philippians prided themselves on more than any other, it was the high rank and title bestowed upon their city by Rome. They were not Italian, but Rome considered them to be so. So, we can only assume that after hearing of Claudius’ ruling about the Jews the leadership in Philippi would have tripped over themselves in their haste to kick the Jews out of Philippi as well.” (6)

Though Paul and his companions were unable to find a synagogue there was a prayerful gathering of faithful women who met for worship on the bank of the Gangites River southwest on the city. On the Sabbath Paul and his companions journeyed to where they were and sat down and began to speak to the women. It was quite common “for such places of prayer to be located outdoors...” (7) This would have been even more likely when Jews were being forced to leave the area. These women had every reason to give up, “The men were no longer there. There was no synagogue, and there was no possibility of having one. The Romans were either persecuting or threatening to persecute the Jews and sticking to their faith was not going to win them any popularity contest in Philippi.” (8) But they came every Saturday which was the Sabbath to meet and pray and carry on their faith.

“It is not all that much different now. People don’t mind taking pot shots at Christians and Christ. Where the name of the Lord is not honored often people use it as a curse word or a joke.” (9) Even today Christians worldwide are often persecuted and have to meet quietly out of the limelight for safety reasons. I have read that between 125 and 250 million Christians worldwide are in danger every day because of their faith. We can’t imagine what that must be like that as Christians in America.

I can remember my brother Eugene telling me the story of how the churchgoing parents living in Saudi Arabia were able to have Vacation Bible School on their military base where he and his family lived. It was illegal. They ordered the materials however which came labeled “VBS.” Since the Saudi officials did not recognize the label as being Christian the materials passed through inspection. All and especially the children always

had a wonderful time.

The only woman whose name we know in this little group was Lydia. She was like Luke, a Gentile who was in the process of joining the Jewish faith. “She grew up in a town called Thyatira (and) was a worshiper of God.” (Acts 16:14) Thyatira was a city a couple of hundred miles southeast of Philippi and well-known for making purple cloth. We do not know when she first came to Philippi, but we know why. “She dealt in purple cloth. Purple was only for the rich. The purple dye was from a shellfish called Murex Truncus.” (10) It took the purple dye from thousands of these sea snails to dye a yard or two of cloth. It was labor intensive and therefore expensive. Purple was a status symbol for the wealthy and those of royal lineage. Even today purple is the color of royalty.

Lydia dealt in purple cloth and her primary customers were Roman citizens. Lydia, most likely following the death of her husband took over the business. It was successful. She was a rich and powerful woman. There are many things we can admire about her but she probably would not want us talking about them: her business, status, wealth or big house where she had servants. What was really important to her was what happened to her that day, when four men showed up unexpectedly and shared with her and the other woman a story of love that they had never heard before. The Lord opened up the heart of Lydia to pay attention to what Paul and the others had to say. They told her the story of God’s son Jesus and how he was born miraculously to a young virgin girl. How his birth had been foretold by prophets of God and announced by angels. How he lived a holy and righteous life and willingly went to the cross to die in our place. How he paid for her sins and the sins of the others. She was amazed to hear that he rose from the dead and ministered to the faithful; how Jesus is now seated in the presence of the Father God and promised to return again. Lydia came to faith accepting Jesus as her Lord and Savior. She found his name written on her heart and her name written in the book of life. Nothing else mattered more to her. There was heartfelt joy when she got to witness to her household about her faith and when she and they were baptized. Her home became the first church in Europe. (Acts 16:40)

The last verses of the final chapter of Proverbs are about a noble and wise woman. Her most outstanding characteristic is her love for the Lord. She is to be praised because she is “a woman who fears the Lord.” (Proverbs 31:30b) “Fear” means having a loving reverence of God and a willingness to follow His lead. Such a woman has a joy that comes from being obedient to the Lord and showing others the way. She has no fear although she does not know what the future holds, she knows who holds the future. Her life reflects the God she loves. She is a good wife and mother. Lydia fits perfectly into this description of a God-fearing woman.

There has always been pressure on women to work hard, to watch over the affairs

of her household and to be God-fearing. Lydia was no exception. She had many hats: business woman, widow, probably a mother, although we are not told if she had children, and caretaker for her household. The hat that mattered most was the one which read: “Baptized and redeemed child of God.” (12) Lydia would not want us to remember all the other stuff about her, only that she was a child of God who was saved by grace through faith. Lydia was Paul’s first Christian convert in Europe. We know her faith grew and that she touched others in Philippi with the message of Jesus because it was not long before there was a thriving church in her home which as previously mentioned was the first church in Europe. It was this loving church family which helped Paul ten years later when he was under house arrest in Rome. The book of Philippians was written by Paul to the church to thank them for the gift they sent to help support him when he couldn’t support himself.

On this Mother’s Day we are reminded of the many mothers who along the way have helped to teach us the most important lesson of life—Jesus loves us. As you know I did not grow up in a church family, but I have always loved going to church and went many times by myself or with my brothers. Often it was at Grant United Methodist Church which was adjacent to my grandparent’s farm in southern Grand Traverse County. I have some wonderful memories of attending church there and of Vacation Bible School as a youngster. I still have a couple of attendance certificates from those days in the mid-1950s. I remember the fun I had and also a couple of teachers, Mrs. Sheets and her neighbor Mrs. Johnson. Those two women for me, and others along the way for each of us, have helped to make Jesus alive in our lives. Happy Mother’s Day and thank you mothers! Amen.

- (1) VIP Communications May 7, 2010 Internet
- (2) OOMA May 2, 2013 Internet
- (3) Acts William Barclay p. 131
- (4) NIV Study Bible “notes” p. 2177
- (5) Ibid. “notes” p. 2337
- (6) Sermoncentral “Happy Mother’s Day, Lydia” Matt Hoffmann May 2010 p.1-2
- (7) NIV Study Bible “notes” p. 2177
- (8) Sermoncentral “Happy Mother’s Day, Lydia” Matt Hoffman May 2012 p. 2
- (9) Ibid. p. 2
- (10) Ibid. p. 3
- (11) Ibid. p. 3
- (12) Ibid. p. 4