

## **The Conversion of Lydia**

Acts 16:11-40 by Patty Friesen (May 22/22)

My name is Lydia and I love purple. I love purple so much that I wear purple and I sell purple. It is the colour of royalty you see and I live in the city of Philippi in Greece which is a Roman garrison outpost so we get many Roman governors and royals riding through Philippi on their white horses through Greece and Turkey to the Holy Land to subdue the Jewish uprisings there. There are not many Jews here in Philippi and I'm not Jewish myself. I grew up Greek in Thyateira which is just north of Ephesus in Turkey, a major trade route which is only 50 km from Athens across the Aegean Sea but there was a synagogue there and we had Jewish business friends there. It was from them that I first heard about the one true God, who created the world in love and created a people to love and serve him always. In those days, we Gentiles worshipped with the Jews in the synagogue. And when I attended synagogue, I also heard from the readings of the prophets, particularly the prophet Amos in chapter 9 that the God of Israel would also reside among the Gentiles and I always believed that to be so.

Thyateira is where I learned my purple dying craft from my family. Among the ancient ruins of the city, inscriptions have been found relating to the guild of dyers in the city. Indeed, more artisan guilds are known in Thyatira than any other contemporary city in the Roman province of Asia (inscriptions mention the following: wool-workers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers, and bronze-smiths). We formed artisan guilds in those days to protect our craft and our pricing. We bonded together so no one would be outpaced or lose out in a competitive market. It was a strong bargaining tool to be a cooperative and it

benefitted all of us in trade and we had a quality product that was in demand in the empire from Europe to Rome to the Far East.

We did so well that when I married my husband, a fellow dyer, we moved to Philippi to serve the Romans' desire for the best purples, luscious shades of rich textured cloth for togas and robes and curtains. Philippi wasn't the prettiest city but a profitable one on a major Roman road with Roman aqueducts. The armies that came and went through our city created their own trade in slave labourers for their building projects. We built a large beautiful house with many servants and workers in our clothing factory. We brought the notion of guild-like care of servants and workers and that employer fairness made them more invested in working for us. Other merchants and traders used slaves but not us. In fact some used slaves for divination and fortune-telling, exploiting their gifts as oracles but more on that later.

When my husband died, I found great support among my women friends Jews and Gentiles, many of whom were business women like me. We used to gather to discuss business and broader topics topics of our hearts' desires in the spiritual life. Philippi was a machismo city, full of pagan Greek and Roman gods and goddesses and worship of the Roman emperor in this military centre. There was no synagogue even to gather. The Hebraic faith was not tolerated here or any other religion because emperor worship was so prevalent and so masculine. So we women would gather outside the city under the trees by the river before it was directed into the aqueducts. (Slide). It was a beautiful, calming place to listen to the water and the wind and for us Jewish and Gentile women alike to recite the Psalms and the stories of Ruth and Esther, Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel and Miriam.

One Sabbath at the river, while we were reciting what we remembered from Torah, two men came and joined us. We were wary of them but they introduced themselves and Paul and Silas, Jewish brothers from Jerusalem who had travelled up from Syria and were looking for a synagogue in which to worship. We told them the nearest one was in Thessalonica but that they could join us here by the river to pray. They joined us in the prayers and afterwards mentioned that in Jerusalem, there was a messenger Son from God named Jesus of Nazareth who taught Jews and Gentiles alike about the coming kingdom of God and who healed and fed the people. The Romans had killed him but whom God had raised him up. Paul told the incredible story of meeting this raised Jesus on the road to Damascus where he was headed to kill Jews and Gentiles alike who followed Jesus. It all seemed incredible yet seemed to confirm the prophets that God would send a servant to make a dwelling place, a house among all the nations.

I told Paul and Silas, I felt like I already lived in that dwelling place of God and they said I could be baptized or washed in the river as a public statement of my desire to dwell with God in the new house made by Jesus. So I talked it over with my household and my guild and told them everything I had learned and they agreed that this Jesus represented everything they believed and wanted to act like so we all got baptized. The whole kit and kibootle the following sabbath.

After we came up out of the river, we felt so amazing and refreshed, in our bodies with the water and in our souls with grace and understanding. Laughing and singing the psalms, I told Paul and Silas, "If you believe that I, as woman and Gentile, am a faithful follower, then come and stay with me in my home. In my house are many

rooms. God has blessed me richly that I might share with others.” So they stayed at my house where we had long conversations late into the night.

But their adventures in Philippi were only beginning. Not everyone appreciated their presence in Philippi - especially the slave traders. Paul and Silas had one big run-in with some slave traders who owned a girl who could tell the future - an oracle who would get into a trance and the spirits would speak through her. She would follow Paul and Silas around the marketplace crying out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation!” She was so annoying so one day Paul spoke to the spirit of divination in her and said, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth to come out of her.” And it did. She looked she had awakened from a trance and when she tried to tell fortunes, she couldn’t do it. That made her owners mad and they dragged Paul and Silas through the marketplace to the court where they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” (Meaning that they declared God and his Son Jesus were the highest gods, not Caesar and the Roman gods.).

The Philippians beat them something fierce and threw them in prison where the jailer beat them some more. About midnight, they were praying and singing hymns to God in their pain and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake so violent the foundations of the prison were shaken and all the doors were opened and chains unfastened. Everyone was so shocked they didn’t know what to do. They just sat there. When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was going to kill himself because he thought all the prisoners had escaped but Paul shouted in a loud voice: “Do not harm yourself, we are all here.”

The jailer called for lights and trembling saw they were all accounted for and he fell before Paul and Silas and said, "Sirs what must I do to be saved?" "Trust in Jesus to save you and your household." The jailer brought them to his house where he dressed the wounds that he had caused and he fed them and he and his whole household were baptized. It was a party like no other in the middle of the night. Later he took them apologetically back to their cells but the next morning the magistrates told him to let them go. When he told Paul this, Paul said, "No way, we were beaten in public and unlawfully jailed though we are Roman citizens. Let the magistrates come and let us out ourselves." The magistrates were really afraid then that Paul would take his case to the Roman Supreme Court so they came with their tails between their legs and apologized and took them outside the city and told them never to come back.

I was going to go visit Paul and Silas in prison that morning. I wasn't afraid to be associated with them - they had changed my life and my family's lives but here they showed up on my doorstep. I brought them in and was astounded by their prison adventure. I fed them up good and when they had recovered from their injuries, they went on further into Greece towards Athens. I told them to write as soon as they could and Paul wrote the most amazing letter where he encouraged us with his own testimony of God's grace despite imprisonment and urged us to become even more like Christ, humble and courageous. We re-read Paul's letter now by the river and our group is growing in this new way of being together - me a successful business woman and the jailer and his family. Who would imagine that we'd belong to the same household in God's house of many rooms?

Sing: As I Went Down to the River to Pray