

The Merchant of Thyatira: Jesus Sovereign Over People's Hearts

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Date: 20 October 2019

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[0 : 00] Turn with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter 16. And Paul is beginning a little series taking us back to the book of Acts. We were looking at it with him some months ago and we're taking up the story again this evening in Acts chapter 16.

If you have one of the church Bibles, I think you'll find that at page 925. And we're going to begin reading at verse 6, which begins really a new section, a new movement of the book.

Paul's so-called second ministry journey has just begun, but this begins really a very important and significant new movement of the gospel outwards.

Very, very important for many and of course for us, because it's the beginning of the gospel coming to mainland Europe. So we're going to read from Acts chapter 16, verse 6 through to 15.

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.

[1 : 17] So passing through Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him, and saying, come over to Macedonia and help us.

And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

So setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace on 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 the city some days, and on the Sabbath day, we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed that there was a place of prayer.

And we sat down and spoke to the women who'd come together. 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.

[2 : 25] And the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, if you've judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.

And she prevailed upon us. Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, please do turn up Acts chapter 16 there, which Willie read for us earlier.

Acts 16, page 925. The first of three visits to this chapter over the next three weeks, and looking at three portraits of salvation.

Well, three portraits of God's sovereignty and salvation, really. But this is the first, looking at the merchant of Thyatira. So, Acts 16, and verse 6.

Please have that open. Now, we sometimes make the mistake of thinking that God is just a little bit bigger than us, a slightly bigger version, a slightly more powerful version of ourselves.

[3 : 43] And so, when we think about his great purposes in all of history, namely, primarily the building of his church, his eternal church, the people of God, the greatest building project in all of human history, when we think about that, we might be tempted to think that God, being a bit bigger than us, is wrapped up with the big picture, with the grand strategy, and just too busy to be bothered with slightly smaller matters.

And that's certainly how it would be if it was you and I, if we were the ones in charge of God's church building project. There's only so much that we can think about.

If you're involved in a big project at work, if you're managing lots of people, tight deadlines, you're probably not too bothered about every single individual in every sub-team and their particular workload, are you?

You just don't have the time to think about it. You've got big picture, you've got big strategy to think about. We can't get our minds around every single individual. We just don't have the capacity.

But God is not like that. And that is the very surprising thing about this section of Luke's account. This is a major moment in the advance of the gospel, a key strategic move into mainland Europe.

[5 : 14] This is where the gospel comes to Europe. It's a huge moment. These chapters here, beginning from chapter 16, verse 6, these chapters that follow, they cover Paul's first evangelistic foray into Europe.

The beginnings of the very first church to be established there are a result of these moments here. As Willie mentioned earlier, we wouldn't be here if this journey had never happened.

It's a key moment. But although that is the big picture, although this is the onward progress of the gospel into Europe, the extraordinary thing is, that is not what Luke gives his time and attention to here in chapter 16.

Instead, almost 95% of this narrative concentrates on three individuals and the way in which the creator of the whole universe, the sovereign Lord, touched their lives and worked salvation for them.

Chapter 16, huge strategic moment. But the focus is on three individuals. It's very striking. And not since the story of Cornelius in chapter 10 has so much attention been on individuals.

[6 : 30] And so we see here in these events in Macedonia in the city of Philippi that when it comes to salvation, God is able to, as well as thinking of the big picture, as well as thinking in terms of continents and people groups, he's also able to think about and work transformation in the lives of individual people.

He knows each one of these three individuals here in Acts 16. The merchant from Thyatira, Lydia. The slave girl and the Philippian jailer.

He knows each one of them. And he knows each and every one of us here in this room intimately. He knows our hearts. He knows our aspirations.

He knows our longings, our desires, our dreams, our relationships. He knows it all because he's the sovereign Lord. He has determined all of our lives.

He knows us intimately. He knew these people intimately. And as the Apostle Paul puts it later in chapter 17 in that address to the Areopagus, the Apostle Paul reminds us that God has determined a lot of periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him.

[7 : 58] God has set each one of us in our place. He knows our lives. He set us in the exact place at the right moment. He is sovereign. And he is sovereign in salvation.

He's able to transform continents, whole nations, whole people groups. but he's also at work in individuals. And so when we, when you cry out to him that he might save those that you know and love, that cry doesn't fall on deaf ears.

He hears and he is able to transform the life of one person. And it's not just a particular type of person either.

He's not the God of the middle class. He's not the God of the working class. He's not the God of Western culture or Middle Eastern culture. No, he's the Lord over all. And he delights to save all.

That's his great desire that all people would turn to him and come to know him and know salvation. And that reality is wonderfully seen in Acts 16.

[9 : 12] As I said, we're looking at three individuals. Individuals from all across the social spectrum. A rich businesswoman, a slave girl, and a working prison officer.

And we'll see in these accounts that the risen Jesus is sovereign over people's hearts. He is sovereign over the powers of darkness. He's sovereign over prison doors.

But before we consider the very first of these three individuals, before we think about Lydia and her conversion, let's notice first those verses 6 to 10 where we see how it was that Paul and his mission team ended up in Europe at all.

It was not what Paul intended, was it? He didn't plan to go to Europe. That wasn't on his horizon at this particular moment. he had set out from Antioch.

You see that a bit earlier in chapter 16. And he'd set out from Antioch and Syria in order to revisit churches from his first missionary journey to go and visit them, to strengthen them, to encourage them.

[10 : 21] And we see there in those opening verses of chapter 16 that he visited Derbe and Lystra and Iconium, places he'd already been to. You can read about those in chapters 14 and 15. And after visiting those places, Paul would have next come to Antioch in Poseidon.

And from there, the logical route would have been to follow one of the major roads running through Antioch. And to follow that road, it was called the Via Sebast, and to take that road down to Colossae.

That was the obvious way to go. But look at verse 6 here. We're told here that they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

And so, they head north through Myasia and attempt to head into Bithynia. But again, look at the end of verse 7, they were prevented. The Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.

So they couldn't go south, they couldn't go north, and so the only route left open to them was to head west towards the coast to go to Troas. And it was there in Troas that Paul had this vision, verse 9.

[11 : 36] A man of Macedonia was there, urging them to come over to Macedonia and help them. And so, verse 10, Paul and his team, they draw the conclusion that God has called them to preach the gospel to them also.

They then make that two-day journey by sea to Neopolis, verse 11 and 12. And once they reach there on the Macedonian coast, they head inland to Philippi.

Now, clearly, this was not Paul's intention, was it, when he first set out from Antioch? He wasn't planning to go to Europe. It was not on his horizon. And undoubtedly, these series of events here in verses 6 to 10 must have been really very confusing for Paul and his team, don't you think?

Imagine if you were there. You run into closed door after closed door. Kept running into dead ends. What's going on? They kept being prevented by the Lord from getting on with gospel work.

It wasn't that Paul was hoping to go to Colossae to do something else. No, he was going to go and preach the gospel. Why was it being stopped? Very strange, very perplexing for Paul and his team, don't you think?

[12 : 52] Doors that seemed like obvious ones to go through were slammed shut in their faces. Not just once, but twice in succession. That is how God sometimes works.

We can't make sense of it at the time, but he does sometimes close what seemed to us to be very obvious doors to go through in order to advance the gospel. Now, we're not really given much detail here, are we?

What exactly it looked like for Paul to be forbidden to go to these places by the Holy Spirit. We're not told exactly what it looked like for Paul to be forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia or what it means that the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go to Bithynia.

We're not told what that looked like. Perhaps it was circumstances or just opportunities not being presented. But whatever form it took, it didn't stop Paul from pressing on, did it?

He knew his general task was to take the gospel to the Jews and the Gentiles. So he doesn't just go home. He doesn't just say, oh, we couldn't go there, we couldn't go there, let's go back home.

[14 : 05] He doesn't do that. He changes direction and keeps going. Paul had his priorities and plans. He thought about where he was going to go next, but ultimately those plans were subservient to the greater plans of God.

His plans to revisit those churches in South Galatia, in Derbe, in Lystra, in Iconium, those plans were clearly blessed by God, weren't they? He allowed them to go and to meet with those folk.

But the plan to go to Asia and Bithynia with the gospel, despite being logical and practical from at least a human perspective, from God's perspective, he had another plan.

He had a greater priority. He saw the bigger picture. He knew where he wanted Paul to go next. Now, we can't expect the regular guidance of vision prophecies in our everyday decision-making, can we?

This was unusual even for Paul, the apostle. But we are encouraged here to trust God's sovereign overruling, his intervention to direct the progress of his word and his people.

[15 : 24] We can trust him because he knows the bigger picture and he will do whatever it takes to have us in the right place at the right time speaking to the right people. He will close doors if he has to.

And so, we're to think. We're to think about our circumstances. We're to think about all that God has revealed to us in his word and adjust our plans accordingly.

Notice in verse 10, after these closed doors and Paul's had this vision, notice that Paul and his team concluded that God was calling them to preach to the Macedonians.

they had to draw a conclusion. They presumably discussed their recent frustrated attempts to go to certain places and also the vision that Paul had received.

And so, they talked together, they reached a conclusion about what they were to do next. They discerned that God really was the one calling the shots. This was the door he wanted us to go through and not the previous two that they thought best.

[16 : 29] And so, despite all the confusion or the frustration, the Lord has led them to this point where they are now heading across the sea and into mainland Europe.

It wasn't Paul's plan. And I doubt there was great confusion along the way, but the Lord was sovereign. And they were trusting him that he knew what he was doing. And so, they find themselves here in the city of Philippi, the key city in the province of Macedonia.

And Luke highlights for us here in this city the work of God and the lives of three individuals. And it was to prove a key city, wasn't it, in the ongoing work of the gospel.

We can look back on that and know that Philippi in particular was a real help and a source of strength and partnership for Paul in the onward spread of the gospel. And Luke focuses in here on three portraits, three people, three portraits of salvation, three individuals on whom God worked powerfully, people from totally different backgrounds.

And we're going to consider the first of these this evening. So, looking particularly now at verses 11 to 15, it's the rich businesswoman, the merchant of Thyatira.

[17 : 51] And we see here in these verses that the risen Lord Jesus, he is sovereign over people's hearts in salvation. He is sovereign.

So, let's look at the details here in verses 11 to 15. Now, Paul's usual practice whenever he went to a new city was to find the synagogue and to preach there.

That was his pattern. But in order for there to even be a synagogue, he had to have at least apparently ten Jewish men. If he had ten Jewish men, you could have a synagogue. But that doesn't seem to be the case here in Philippi.

And so, the Jews, when they live in a place without a synagogue, their practice is to go down to the river and to gather there and meet there to worship the Lord. And so, when Paul and his team arrive in Philippi, they suppose that there must be a gathering down by the river.

And so, they go on the Sabbath and sure enough, they find a group of women who are there to meet together. And so, Paul and his team as they expect they found these women and so Paul began to teach, proclaiming the very same message that has been proclaimed in every other place he's been to so far.

[19 : 07] And as you read this account, as you read these words, it's fairly unspectacular, isn't it? what we're reading about here is the foundation of the Christian church in mainland Europe.

And this was a crucial church. This was a huge moment in the spread of the gospel and that passes without any real fireworks, does it? It's very low-key, very small, just a small group of women and one in particular is mentioned.

It's nothing spectacular. We're introduced to this particular woman in verse 14. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia from the city of Thyatira and she was a seller of purple goods and that makes perfect sense because Thyatira was a real center of that industry.

They were key in the production of purple goods and this was high-end stuff. Don't think Primark, think Ralph Lauren or something like that. This was top end.

This was really expensive stuff. Purple clothes were for the wealthy, for royalty even. And so as a purple goods merchant, Lydia would have been a woman of some means.

[20 : 26] She was likely a very wealthy businesswoman. But not only was she a wealthy woman, we're also told that she was a worshiper of God. Look there at the end of verse 14.

She was a worshiper of God. She's clearly become acquainted with Judaism over the years. She's what you might call a God-fearer, much like Cornelius was in chapter 10.

And so she's familiar with the scriptures. She's heard teaching from the Old Testament. She worships God. And so she's eager to hear Paul when he comes and as they're teaching there by the river.

And verse 14 puts it, she's one who heard us. She was there listening. And what we see here, despite being so matter-of-fact and unspectacular, it is nothing less than a supernatural miracle worked by the Lord, isn't it?

And that's clear as we consider the key elements in her conversion. Notice three things. Paul speaks. The Lord opened her heart and Lydia paid attention.

[21 : 41] And very crucially, at the center of it all, this is a miracle of the Lord. After all the frustration of closed door after closed door in Asia, here in Philippi, on the continent of Europe, the Lord wonderfully opens Lydia's heart.

And that's the only way that anyone ever comes to faith, isn't it? The Lord must be at work. He's the one who opens people's hearts.

Of course, faith comes through someone speaking the gospel, as Paul does so here. But Paul didn't make Lydia a Christian. That is beyond even his considerable gifting.

He didn't make Lydia a believer. No, it's the Lord who opens her heart. God. And as a result of the Lord doing that, look at what it says, she paid attention to what was said by Paul.

That is the sign that God is at work in your life, in anyone's life. They pay attention. Their hearts are open, they pay attention to the word.

[22 : 54] God. Now, if you're here this evening, and you wouldn't perhaps describe yourself as a follower of Jesus yet, perhaps a friend has invited you here.

Perhaps you're just popped in as you walk by. Perhaps you are searching for meaning and hope in a world that's about to crack under the wake of Brexit and climate change and all sorts of things.

Perhaps you're looking for salvation, for redemption, for hope. Well, if that's you, then the only way to salvation and certain hope is to listen to God's word and ask him to open your heart.

The sign that he's at work in someone's life is not something outwardly spectacular, but rather it's the fact that you are eager to pay attention to his word, to read it, to hear what he has to say, to listen to God's word being taught.

That's the sign that God is at work in someone's life. When they're eager to pay attention, to listen. Perhaps you're here and you've been a Christian for a long time and you long, you long for the folk you know, the folk you love, to come to Christ, to seek forgiveness for their sins, to repent, to know the Lord Jesus as their saviour, to know that certainty of everlasting life.

[24 : 19] And the reality is you and I can't make that happen. You and I can't save people. Only the risen Lord Jesus has sovereignty over people's hearts.

And so it is to him that you must pray, that I must pray. Of course we have a role to play. We can invite them to come and hear.

We can often read with them. But it will take a miracle, won't it, for your friend, for your family member to come to Christ. He has to open their hearts. And so we must pray.

It's such a small thing, isn't it? It doesn't take much. But so often we forget. We get busy. We have other things to do. And so to help us do that, why don't we together try and help each other to pray for our friends?

Because it's him who opens hearts. That's what we see here, isn't it? The Lord opened our hearts. It wasn't Paul. It wasn't the others that were with him. It wasn't Lydia herself.

[25 : 24] It was the Lord. He was the one who opened our hearts. And so let's be praying for folk we know. Pray for them. And one way we can do that together, one way we can help each other to do that is to pray 3-1-1.

3-1-1. Pray for three friends once a week for one minute. Three friends once a week for one minute. Now I think I could manage that.

I think we could all probably manage that, don't you? To bring to the Lord three of our friends, three of our family members, three of our neighbours, at least once a week and pray for their salvation.

Pray that the Lord would open their hearts. Just a minute. I asked Siri as I was preparing this, how many minutes are there in a week?

And the answer, it came back in an Australian accent, I picked that for Siri. And Siri's answer, 10,080 minutes. 10,080 minutes in a week.

[26 : 31] So could we give one? Could we give one minute a week? And we'll do it tonight. We'll spend a minute at the end of the sermon, we'll just quiet on ourselves and think about three people and pray for them for a minute.

Pray for their salvation. Pray that the Lord would open their hearts and they would come to know him. So we'll do that later, 311. And over these next months, and we can keep reminding each other, we'll come back next week and just say, how's 311 going?

You pray for your friends? Just a minute a week. Well, the Lord opened wonderfully Lydia's heart.

And who knows the people that were around her, praying for her? Who knows all the different people that brought her to this point? But there she was, she heard Paul, the Lord worked on her hearts, and she paid attention.

The Lord opened Lydia's heart, and she professes faith, faith, and her whole household. Verse 15 is baptized as well. It's the first Christian household in Europe.

[27 : 41] What a wonderful thing. There in Philippi. This is a monumental moment in the progress of the Gospels that comes into Europe. And yet it all happened so quietly, so unassumingly, in the hearts of that merchant woman from Thyatira.

the Lord opened her heart. And notice verse 15, she opened her home.

Lydia's willingness to open her home would be crucial for Paul's ongoing work. This was a church, the Philippian church.

It was a church that would prove so crucial for Paul's onward mission. This church partnered closely with Paul, funded his ministry, prayed for him, strived with him for the progress of the Gospel.

And the root of that real generosity, that real partnership with Paul, well, no doubt it was Lydia here, wasn't it? She would have been at the very heart of that there in Philippi.

[28 : 49] Lydia and her attitudes of real Gospel generosity. And so Luke is showing us here, not just her response to the Gospel in terms of receiving it and being baptized, but also in the evidence of her faith, that it was genuine.

God opened her heart and she opened her home. A real tangible evidence of her real faith. And straight after her coming to faith, she instinctively realizes that all she has, all that she's earned through her commerce, through her purple goods selling, all of that, including her home, has been given to her by God and must now be given to the Lord and used for the furtherance of his Gospel.

She sees that so clearly, doesn't she? It wasn't that Paul had to urge her and plead with her to compel her that it was her duty to give to the cause of the Gospel.

No, it's the other way around, isn't it? It's the opposite. She had to compel Paul. Come and stay in my home. Let me look after you. Let me help you in the progress of the Gospel.

She had to urge him to stay. And so Lydia's home became a real Gospel foothold, not only there in Philippi, but also in the whole continent.

[30 : 13] It's a really significant city, a really significant home, a really significant woman here. Listen to this from Paul's letter, which he wrote to the Philippian church.

Here's what he says, And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the Gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only.

Even in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs once and again. You see, this was a church that generously contributed to Paul's Gospel mission.

And there's no doubt that Lydia's contribution would have been significant. And one key evidence that God is at work in the hearts of those who've turned to him, in our hearts, is if our homes are opened, if our wallets are opened, if our possessions are opened to the progress of the Gospel.

We are to be generous with all that God has given us for the sake of the progress of the Gospel, for the sake of God's people, to show real hospitality to fellow believers, to give sacrificially for the growth of the Gospel.

[31 : 30] They are the marks of real Gospel faith. A closed home, a wallet that is firmly clamped shut, they're not good signs, are they?

If we're stingy with the resources we have, I think it's probably likely pointed to a much deeper problem, a fundamental failure to understand the heart of the Gospel and God's great generosity towards us.

That's the very heart of the Gospel, isn't it? God sent his own son to die in our place for our sin. Astonishing generosity. What a price he paid. And so our response is to open our homes, open our wallets for the sake of the Gospel.

That's what Lydia does. She opens her home, she prevails upon Paul. And this church in Philippi was a real source of strength and encouragement for Paul in the ongoing work of the Gospel.

You see, God, he is building his church and he's called us to take part in that with him, to partner with him and with one another in that task.

[32 : 43] I think Lydia clearly understood that. She understood that she was now a partner with Paul in this Gospel work. And all of us here tonight, we are all partners together in that work. We are partners working together on a lifeboat, rescuing people who are dead and drowning in sin.

That's our task. We're not patrons on a cruise ship, seeking to make life as comfortable as possible for ourselves. We're partners working on a lifeboat.

We're not patrons on a cruise. Perhaps the cruise image doesn't really resonate for some. I'm starting to appreciate the joy of a cruise.

With four young children at home, I can get nothing better than being on a cruise, escaping from the real world. And sometimes I don't want to think about the church in that way. It's a refuge from the real world, something to get comfortable and enjoy myself.

That's the wrong way to think about it. We're not on a cruise ship. This is a lifeboat. We're on a rescue mission. So let's not just admire from a distance Lydia's generosity, but to do likewise.

[33 : 56] We are commanded to. We're commanded to be generous for the sake of the gospel. But let's not miss the big thing that Luke is telling us here.

He is showing us that God is sovereign in salvation. Don't forget that. He's sovereign. He cares.

He cares for the global progress of his gospel to the ends of the earth. Nothing will stop that. The gates of hell will not prevail against that. But at the very same time, he is caring for, he is rescuing individuals.

People just like you and me. He can do both things at the same time. Just look at what he did to bring salvation, to Lydia and her household.

He literally took Paul and moved him continents. Door after door slammed in his face. But all ultimately so that he would be in just the right place at just the right time and according to God's plan and God's purpose.

[35 : 08] And that is, I hope, a great comfort to you and I. We may face frustrations, doors closing, but the Lord is the one who sees it all.

He's directing it all. And he's doing it to achieve his great plans, his great purposes. For the world, but individuals.

So we can trust him. So let's together trust him, shall we? And let's bring to all to the Lord now, shall we? As we spend some moments in prayer, we'll stay quiet for a minute.

And think about three people, three people you know and love. Pray for them, pray for their salvation, the Lord would open their hearts.

So let's pray for a minute and I'll close in prayer after that. So let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[36 : 05] Thank you.

Thank you.

But you do so to perform your wonders. Your purposes will ripen fast. The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.

Lord, help us to believe this reality. Help us to trust you. And to be comforted that it is you who is sovereign over the hearts of men and women.

And help us to remember that it is your work to rescue and bring people to yourself. So please would you help us. Help us to trust you.

[37 : 47] And help us to partner with you in your gospel work. We ask in Jesus name. Amen.