

A Businesswoman Believes!

Acts 16:11-15

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Introduction

I want to start with a short story about my wife's journey to faith in Jesus. Tori was brought up in a Christian family and faithfully taken to church every week. When she was 11, she went away on a youth camp where the speaker challenged the room: "If you were to die tonight, would you go to heaven or hell?" Pretty heavy for an 11-year-old, but it had the desired effect. Tori began to reflect on her spiritual state, and she put her trust in Jesus to save her from her sins. She was then baptised later in life and has been growing in and by God's grace.

In contrast to dramatic conversions with flashing lights, Tori's testimony is rather uneventful; though I'm sure she's much happier that way. Yet, in both types of stories, real conversion takes place, and true faith in Jesus is found.

Every conversion is special and uneventful conversions are no less biblical. We find in our passage today a lady named Lydia whose testimony will be similar to many in this room. We could read her story as regular church attendance when one day a spoken gospel message opens her heart. But Lydia's story is also everyone's story. Whether you are an atheist or a Christian or somewhere in between, Lydia's journey to true faith gives us all an opportunity to consider where we are on this journey.

We're first going to dive into our passage to unpack some context, and then I have 3 points about true faith I want to draw out: true faith comes from God alone, anyone can have true faith, and true faith reveals itself in action.

Story

If you have a Bible with you, it would be good to keep it open at Acts 16:11-15, but I asked Omeyi to read from verse 6 because, from there, we learn who verse 11 is all about. We discover that it is a man called Paul and his companions. But who are they and what are they doing in Philippi?

Now Paul's story is extraordinary. Paul used to be called Saul, and Saul was an extremely zealous Jew who severely persecuted early Christians. Then, on a journey to Damascus, the risen Jesus appears to Saul in a heavenly light, and then blinds him! Jesus then sends a man called Ananias to Saul to restore his sight, which he does, and Saul becomes convinced that Jesus is the Son of God.

When Jesus sends Ananias to Saul, he makes this extraordinary statement. In Acts 9 (v15) he says, *'This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.'* Jesus proclaims the murderer of Christians is going to become the most significant missionary of the Christian faith.

And that's exactly what takes place. Saul immediately begins to declare that Jesus is the Son of God. He changes his name from Saul to Paul and he goes on four missionary journeys around the Mediterranean Sea. Here in Acts 16, we find Paul and his missionary team on their second journey and God has just sent them west to the region of Macedonia.

And that lands us at verse 11. You may have also noticed the change from third person to first person tell us the author of Acts, the same Luke who wrote Luke's Gospel, has joined the team on this leg of the journey.

The team have likely chosen Philippi as their first stop in Macedonia because it is the first city of significance they could reach from the port in Neapolis, which means it will likely have a synagogue. Paul's usual method of preaching was to go into synagogues and share the good news of Jesus with the Jews who already had the concept of God and his promised saviour.

The team goes into the city searching for a synagogue, but they don't find one. So, they go to the next most likely place to find a group of Jewish worshippers - by the river. If there wasn't a synagogue, it was custom for the Jews to meet for prayer by running water so they could administer their cleaning rituals.

There they find exactly who they're looking for. And it's no surprise that they are mostly, if not all, women. To form a synagogue you needed ten men, and no number of women could supplement that, so here the women meet by the river. Paul and his team finally have their chance to share the wonderful message of Jesus the saviour.

Luke doesn't tell us about all the people they meet in Philippi, or everything that happened during their many days there, but he does tell us about one woman was listening to their message named Lydia. Lydia is a really distinctive person for her time. She's a wealthy businesswoman from her sales of purple cloth, which was highly valued at that time, we're talking emperors and senators. She doesn't appear to be married. And, though she is not Jewish or Greek, but from Thyatira in modern day Turkey, she is follower of the Jewish religion, and living over 300 miles away in the Roman colony of Philippi.

None of this stops Paul from preaching his message of salvation to her. And as she listens, the Lord performs the transforming work of conversion. Her heart is opened, and she discovers true faith. She then reveals her true faith in action. She gets baptised, publicly declaring her newfound belief, and becomes insistently hospitable.

#1 True faith comes from God alone

The standout sentence of this passage to me is in v14, *'The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.'* Not Lydia's innate goodness or a sudden epiphany, not Paul's conversation or charisma, ***'the Lord opened her heart'***. True faith comes from God alone.

We all initially have hard and stubborn hearts. We do not want to accept that there is a God because his existence indicates a standard that we don't want to follow. We want to do our

own thing, whatever makes us happy and not what pleases God. As John 3:19 and 20 say, *'Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.'*

To try and justify our stubbornness, we rebrand it as freedom, but we are not free. Ephesians 4 says *'They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.'* (v18). Because we keep hardening our hearts and walking away from God's goodness, we are separated from God like water and oil. God is so perfect he cannot bear the sight of the tiniest wickedness. So, we miss the blessings of a relationship with him in this life, and we spend eternity without him. Eternity without any goodness and the right retribution for our wrongdoing.

Praise the Lord that it doesn't have to end like this. How wonderful is John 3:16 and 17. *'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.'*

We are completely reliant on God to save us from the immorality of our selfishness because there is no way we can atone for it. Like trying to remove fat from a BBQ with a greasy cloth, we cannot wipe our slates clean. The glorious news is that God can and has. He brought a clean cloth! He sent his perfect Son to die undeservedly on a cross where he took all the punishment that we deserve for failing God's good standard so that we can spend eternity with joy in heaven instead. And praise the Lord that he undoes our hardheartedness to receive this news like he did for Lydia.

What part do we play then? Romans 10:9 says, *'If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.'*

God reaches out to the world with his good news in many remarkable ways but with Lydia we simply see a sermon. Maybe not even a sermon but a conversation about Jesus. This is enough because his word, the Bible, tells us everything we need to be saved. So, if you don't know Jesus yet, I highly recommend picking up God's word at home or in church or both.

And if we Christians believe the only way to true faith is through God alone then we need to be praying that he enlightens the hearts of those we love. We need to be prepared to show them Jesus in the Bible and we need to be willing to have those conversations, or at least point them in someone else's direction, all the time praying that the Lord does the work that we can't.

#2 Anyone can have true faith

Sin is our only barrier to a restored relationship with God. It is a pretty big barrier but Jesus has broken it so anyone can have true faith.

I think Luke deliberately highlights the uniqueness of Lydia's identity. It's almost as if he is saying "your gender, your marital status, your ethnicity, and your employment do not make you unfit to hear God's word."

Lydia is just a normal person. We can't and shouldn't force her into one category. "She's an outsider because she's a woman and a foreigner." "She's the elite because she's rich and religious." She's just an interesting, unique, and complex human being like all of us. There is nothing about her that makes her more or less worthy of hearing the gospel.

And Paul lives this out. He would later write in Galatians 3, *'in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'* He modelled exactly this by sharing the good news with these women, not waiting around for the men as may have been expected, or only preaching to a certain race, and by entering Lydia's home at her invitation.

Lydia's conversion shows us that anyone can have true faith, regardless of their identity, but there is also a specific challenge here to religious people. Luke classes Lydia as a worshiper of God so he must have understood she was committed to her religion but didn't have true faith yet. I was really struck by this comment from Matthew Henry which I paraphrase slightly, 'It is not enough to be worshippers of God, we must be believers in Jesus Christ. True worshippers of God will see their need for Jesus.'

Whether you are a football fan or not, I'm sure you have all heard the name Lionel Messi. Since winning the World Cup with Argentina last winter, he has somehow become even more famous. So, inevitably, all 60,000 tickets to Argentina's friendly against Indonesia were sold in 12 minutes. Now that's worship. But not true worship, because if you were a true worshipper of Messi (and please don't worship footballers) then you would have known he was actually on holiday and wouldn't play in that game and you wouldn't need to buy a ticket. One Indonesian fan said, "If Messi came, we would be more excited. But it's okay."

It is very possible in nominally Christian Britain to say that you are a Christian without believing in Jesus. I imagine that's also the case in many countries around the world where the national religion is Christianity. Maybe you're a Christian because your family is or everyone in your area is. Maybe you have attended Sunday mornings for a long time, or you were christened at a young age. Is there someone here this morning who calls themselves a Christian or sees themselves as religious, but has yet to put their trust in Jesus to save them from their wrongdoing? Unlike the Indonesian fan, you cannot enjoy the game without Messi because there is no true Christian faith without Christ.

But, just like Lydia, you are welcome no matter your identity, and, just like Lydia, your heart can be opened to believe and find **true** faith.

Those of us who are confident in our faith have a task to see the world as Paul and his team did. As Pete challenged us last week, do we help or hinder others coming to the gospel with our attitudes to them? Would we approach the river and go "Oh, this sort of person is there, so I'm going to turn around"?

#3 True faith reveals itself in action

Finally, true faith reveals itself in action.

In Matthew 5, Jesus says, *“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”* (v14-16)

With true faith, our new ultimate goal in life is to actively glorify the God who saved us. After the Lord opens her heart, Lydia reveals her true faith by getting baptised and then serving others.

Baptism is a wonderful event; I’m really looking forward to sharing in the joy of our baptisms next week. Baptism is so joyous because it is the public declaration of an individual of their love for Christ and the saving faith God has worked in their heart. Baptism is the obvious next step after conversion. God has saved me; I want to let the world know.

That said, I got baptised 7 years after I first made a confession of faith. I didn’t want to get baptised until I knew I wouldn’t abandon my faith, because I’d seen friends do just that. Tori waited 5 years because she was afraid of public speaking which you shouldn’t be forced to do when getting baptised, it doesn’t say that anywhere in the Bible, and we don’t force that at Manor Park. And I’ve heard many people say they don’t want to get baptised because they don’t feel good enough or it isn’t the right stage of life.

These are all understandable uncertainties and reasons for caution but this passage refocuses our concerns. It keeps things simple. The only requirement for baptism is true faith, and a clear mark of living faith is the desire for baptism.

The saved life is also a serving life. I like this quote from John Stott. ‘Once the heart is opened, the home is opened too.’ When the Lord opens your heart and you invite Christ in, your life is transformed to follow his model of God’s standard. Galatians 5 (v13-14) says, *‘You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”’* Lydia does this initially by inviting the missionary party round to her house. But, by the end Acts 16 in v40, her home has already become a meeting place for the other converts of Paul’s mission in Philippi; a gathering that would form the Philippian church.

How can we follow suit? Lydia obviously is wealthy and owns a large home and not everyone can do what she did but that doesn’t mean we can’t serve others within our own means and capacity. If you only have space for one person, who is the one person who would benefit most from your hospitality? If you don’t feel you can cook, then can you use your money to take them out for coffee? If you don’t feel you have the spare change, how can you use your time to serve someone else?

If we have true faith, let's not hide our light under a bowl, but let it shine bright through action. If you aren't sure about where your faith is, a desire for baptism and to serve others is a good indicator that your faith is alive and well.

Conclusion

Lydia and her story are unique, but they are also very normal. Many of us believers will be able to identify with parts of her tale, and there are also messages for unbelievers. Her story is a useful guide to the unbeliever and a beneficial review for the believer.

If you have not found true faith, then I pray these verses will open your heart. There is no barrier of identity to a relationship with God, only that of our sin and that barrier has been broken by the death of Jesus. You are welcome and your heart too can be opened. Seek the one and the only one who will lead you from unfulfilling sinful life to satisfying everlasting life.

If you have found true faith, how does Lydia's story encourage and challenge you? I hope it has reminded you of the grace God has worked in your life from your conversion to now. I hope it has encouraged you with the gospel message and the worthwhileness of your service. But also let it challenge you. Where do my attitudes towards other people and to Godly action not align with the Godly examples of Paul, Luke, and Lydia?