

Lydia and Servant Girl: A Tale of Two Women

Acts 16:11-21

Introduction

Almost one hundred years ago, the “floating city” set sail on its maiden voyage from England to New York City. It was the most luxurious vessel ever built by man. Because of its double hull and sixteen watertight compartments, it was considered unsinkable.

It was Sunday, April 14th, when the *Titanic* approached the North Atlantic ice fields. At 11:00 p.m., the crew spotted an iceberg the size of a small mountain dead ahead. Frantic orders were given to steer the massive liner to port to avoid a collision. They succeeded.

Contrary to popular belief, the *Titanic* did not collide head-on with the iceberg. But that was unfortunate, for the ice beneath the surface of the water treated the ship’s hull like warm butter being cut by a knife. The ice sliced an opening that was no more than a quarter of an inch wide, but more than three hundred feet long.

Eva Hart was seven years old at the time. She was recently interviewed by Bob Garner in an article that I read. She talked about the horror of that night, when she and her mother were among the lucky ones to make it into one of only twenty lifeboats. Why have lifeboats for everyone when you are unsinkable?! Her father was left behind.

Eva talked of the way the character of people became evident. Some were courageous. Most of the men and teenage boys helped women and children into the lifeboats as the command was given that women and children only were to board them. Some men, however, slipped back into staterooms

and put on women’s clothing in order to get aboard a lifeboat. The *Titanic* sank, claiming over 1,500 lives.

The tragic, though often untold story about that night actually involved another vessel less than twenty miles away from the *Titanic*. The vessel was the *Californian*, and it could have rescued many, if not all, of those who would soon drown in the icy water – if only someone had been listening to the distress signals sent out by the *Titanic*. But no one was listening on the *Californian*, because the radio operator had fallen asleep on duty. As a result of that, help would not come until it was too late to save more than a few. The one who could have rescued them never heard their cry for help.

In Acts, chapter 16, a cry for help came across the Aegean Sea from Europe. Europe was a continent darkened by savagery and ruled by barbarians who roamed the forests of Germany, drowning in idolatry. From that continent came a cry for help that landed on the shores of Asia Minor. This cry for help, however, was heard. The man from Macedonia appears in a vision to Paul in verse 9. He is standing and appealing to Paul, and saying,

... *Come over to Macedonia and help us.*

“Come over and help us” is a spiritual SOS, like a flare shot into the night sky. Paul receives this vision from God and immediately knows that God wants him to form a rescue party and head to Europe.

Now notice verses 10 through 13 of Acts, chapter 16.

When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel

to them. So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled.

These verses, by the way, tell us a lot about the spiritual condition of Philippi. Jewish law required the establishment of a synagogue in any town or village where there were at least ten Jewish men. The fact that the place of prayer was by the river, out in the open, reveals that there were less than ten men faithful to Israel's God in the entire city of Philippi. Furthermore, once they arrived at the place of prayer, there were no men even present; only women had assembled. This sends a strong message about Paul, a former Pharisee, and his attitude toward the female gender. It is significant that the first people Paul ever preached to in Europe were women.

It seems, as J. Vernon McGee quipped, "The man from Macedonia was actually a woman."

You need to understand that in this culture, women were not ministered to with the scriptures as men were. In fact, the rabbis of Paul's day actually wrote, "It is better that the words of the law be burned than be delivered to a woman."

The Pharisees would rise each morning and pray, as Paul himself must have prayed when he was a Pharisee, "Lord, I thank thee that I was not born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman."

What changed Paul's attitude toward women? The gospel of Jesus Christ.

Later, Paul will publicly write of his appreciation for women who faithfully served the Lord with him.

Our country, which is saturated with the gospel, has given the role of women dignity and respect. Just compare us to other countries without the gospel, where women are slaves and beasts of burden.

As Paul arrives in Europe and goes down to the riverside, he does not repack his bags and walk away when he discovers that only women are in attendance, as any Pharisee or rabbi would have done. Instead, he delivers the gospel. The gospel has changed Paul's view of women. They are now given the same chance as men to hear the wonderful truths of God's new revelation.

Isn't it fascinating that women, not men, will become the first audience of the apostle Paul as he arrives in Europe to spread the gospel.

Led By the Spirit

Notice verse 14a of Acts, chapter 16.

A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; . . .

We are now given some details concerning one of the women at that prayer meeting. First, we are told about her career. You need to understand that her job was as lucrative as any successful business in America. Having the ability to sell fine linen that had been dyed purple was like owning the microchip patent for fine computers.

The purple dye was obtained from the secretion of shellfish. Approximately eight thousand shellfish were required to produce one gram of purple dye. So purple cloth was the "Lexus" of clothing.

Purple garments were worn by the emperors. Each Roman senator wore a white outer garment trimmed with purple cloth. Private citizens wore purple clothing as proof of their wealth.

Lydia was the middleman, the broker, in this operation that began on the coast and worked its way into Europe. She was enormously wealthy, as we will see indicated by her ability to invite four men to stay on her estate with the servants, food, and accommodations to meet their needs.

The text also informs us that she was "a worshiper of God". In other words, she, a Gentile, had abandoned the idolatry of her countrymen. She had chosen to follow the Old Testament and its introduction of Yahweh, the one and only true God.

A tale of conversion and commitment

Now the last part of verse 14 tells us that she,

. . . was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.

The verb tense informs us that this happened over a period of time. She did not just hear Paul once, but on several occasions. God opened her heart with each new discussion, until she finally responded in faith.

This is a marvelous verse of God's sovereign grace. He is taking a person who is dead in trespasses and sins and bringing about the miracle of an awakened conscience.

The ability to believe the gospel was not generated by you. You were dead, and a dead person cannot generate anything. It was generated by God. And the proof of that supernatural regeneration is that your heart responded to the gospel. This verse tells us that, before Lydia ever believed, God was behind it all opening her heart in order that she might believe.

My friend, if your heart does not respond to the word; if there is no impulse within you that finds interest in the words spoken by Paul, the sacred scriptures; if you can take God or leave Him; if you can take His church or leave it; if there is no sense of obligation to serve Him and honor Him, you may very well be spiritually dead. You should be terrified enough to get on your knees and beg God to perform the miracle of regeneration, because you have no sign of spiritual life.

Now notice the first phrase of verse 15.

And when she and her household had been baptized, . . .

Now stop at this point. There are those who see infants in this phrase. If you see a baby being baptized in this passage, you can read in between the lines better than most preachers I know.

The term “household” could refer to her servants and staff. In fact, if you want to argue from silence, you could say that she was not even married. There is never a mention of Mr. Lydia, and certainly no mention of children.

Since baptism, “baptizo,” or “immerse,” is the public step of obedience and identification with Christ and His church, and, since Jesus Christ Himself commanded it be done to disciples (Matthew 28), what transpired was that her household had also believed the gospel message that Paul delivered. That argument, also from silence, is at least consistent with other scripture.

A tale of warm welcome

Now notice verse 15b.

. . . she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us.

In other words, “If you have been able to determine that I have been committed to Jesus Christ, please use my house to base your ministry. Let my business resources be used to further the gospel of Christ.”

I find it interesting that this woman was willing to connect her business success with the propagation of the gospel. Her home, which was the headquarters of her thriving corporation, became part and parcel of Paul’s ministry.

Where, today, is the president of a company; the owner of a business; the CEO of a company with the proposition that some of their corporate profits be given to their church and ministry with the idea that their company could financially advance the gospel through year end profits?

Lydia saw the connection, and her business became the base of operations for reaching Philippi with the gospel. May her tribe increase among us as God blesses us.

Led By the Serpent

Now the text introduces us to another woman involved in a lucrative business. This time, however, her business is involved with the underworld; literally, the world of demons and divination.

A tale of spiritual slavery

Now on to verse 16.

It happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling.

Many expositors believe that her masters were actually priests from the nearby temple of Apollo. I will throw my hat in the ring with them. The reason for that conclusion is the word “divination”. It comes from the Greek word “puthona,” which transliterated, gives us our word “python”. “The spirit of divination” can also be rendered “the spirit of python”.

This particular religion was part of Greek mythology. The stories vary. Some say that Apollo killed the python that once guarded a famous sanctuary in Delphi. Others retell the story so the serpent actually lived, and Apollo, the god of prophecy, spoke through the serpent foretelling the future. We do know, conclusively, that the priestess of Apollo, whose symbolism involved a serpent, was supposedly capable of predicting the future.

It is fascinating to remember that the first creature to supposedly tell the future was the serpent in the garden. He was the mouthpiece of Lucifer, who predicted to Eve that, if she ate of the fruit that

God had forbidden, she would not die but become as wise as God.

How the heart hungers for the knowledge of the future. Anyone in Paul’s day who was considered capable of telling the future, was described as being led by the python; led by the serpent.

A tale of callous corruption

Now, notice what she is doing in verse 17.

Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, “These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you a way of salvation.”

What is wrong with that? It sounds like free advertising. Why would it bother Paul?

Well, put a jeer in your voice and a cynical sneer on your face and then say it. “These men are bond-servants of the Most High God . . . yea, right.”

Take the sneer out, and say the last phrase, “Listen to them, they are proclaiming to you a way of salvation.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. It was not a way to add to the numerous ways of the Greek idolaters. Jesus Christ was the way, the truth, and the life. No one would be saved unless they came to Christ.

She is running around saying, “Hey, they have another way. You need to add their way to yours.”

Finally, Paul had had enough. Continue to verses 18 and 19.

She continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!” And it came out at that very moment. But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities,

Luke uses his dry sense of humor in verse 18, when he says that the demon came out or, literally, exited. He uses the same word in verse 19, when he says that her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone or had exited too.

Everything was alright until Paul and Silas messed with the bottom line. These men were agitated only after their profit exited.

Application – A Study In Contrast

Let us take a careful look at this story and make application by way of studying the contrast between those in this story who were led by the Spirit and those who were led by the serpent. The table below will show the contrasts and then, we will discuss each item.

Those led by the serpent:	Those led by the Spirit:
Have a blindness to spiritual significance;	Demonstrate an acceptance of truth;
Greedily clutch, no matter what it does to others;	Exemplify sharing for the sake of others;
Deceitfully cloak their true motives;	Have an honest confession before others;
Have their citizenship in and loyalty to earth.	Have their citizenship in and loyalty to heaven.

Those led by the serpent have a blindness to spiritual significance

- First, those led by the serpent have a blindness to spiritual significance.

Imagine the significance of this demonstration. Paul is exercising power over Apollo and a form of religion, and these men never stop to ask, “Hey, who are you? And who is this Jesus Christ that you mentioned? He obviously has more power than our Apollo. We want to know more about Him.”

Instead, they remind me of the time Jesus sent the demons from the madman of Gadara into the swine. The owners of the swine were upset that the swine rushed into the sea. They never asked, “Hey, how’d you do that?”

Why didn’t they ask? Why don’t they sense the spiritual significance of what is happening around them? Because, as I Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 14, tells us,

. . . a natural man [those who follow the serpent] does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

Those led by the Spirit demonstrate an acceptance of truth

- By contrast, those led by the Spirit demonstrate an acceptance of truth.

As observed in Lady Lydia, she endured the stares of her countrymen as she stepped into the water and, purple robe and all, identified with her Savior's death and resurrection.

Those led by the serpent greedily clutch, no matter what it does to others

- Secondly, those led by the serpent, greedily clutch, no matter what it does to others.

Who cares about this girl? Who cares about these strangers? Beat them; throw them in jail. Why? Because they messed with our bottom line; our corporate profit. Do away with them.

Those led by the Spirit exemplify sharing for the sake of others

- By contrast, those led by the Spirit exemplify sharing for the sake of others.

Lydia said, "Here's my home; my food." I can only guess that Paul, for the first time in his life, lived in splendor, surrounded by purple, while being pampered by the hospitality of this dear woman.

Those led by the serpent deceitfully cloak their true motives

- Thirdly, those led by the serpent deceitfully cloak their true motives.

Notice verses 20 and 21.

and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans."

Just like the serpent, these followers of the serpent disguised their true motive under the garb of national pride; concern for the customs of the Romans, when the truth was nothing more than crass greed. Their heart was in their wallet, and Paul had, in effect, picked their wallets clean.

Christianity is tolerated until it adversely impacts profitability, then watch out!

Those led by the Spirit have an honest confession before others

- By contrast, those led by the Spirit have an honest confession before others.

I had a delightful visit recently, in the home of an Australian family who are making their way through our church membership Greenhouse Class. They were talking about their past involvement in the Baptist church in Australia. They told me that Australians actually have a saying for something that is difficult to do; in fact, nigh unto impossible. They say, "That's more difficult than for a Baptist to tell a lie."

I said, "Listen, now that you're in America, it's different. Baptist are known for their dinner on the grounds. In fact, the joke is that a Baptist thinks that to get into heaven he has to bring a covered dish!"

Dishonesty is so rampant that the church of any denomination is considered a high risk by the banking industry. I recently sat in the office of the bank manager that handles my accounts – someone to whom I have promised decades of financial support. I said to her, "Listen, I've heard this rumor that pastors and clergymen are high on the risk scale for defaulting on bank loans. Can you verify that?"

She turned a little pink, laughed, and said, "Unfortunately it's true. Ministers are the second highest risk, just behind car salesmen."

The truth is, Christians at large have not set any standard for living in America. A poll was taken some time ago among church goers. It was a confidential, anonymous poll. Forty percent of the participants admitted to some form of dishonesty – whether it was cheating on a test, calling in sick when well, or fudging on expense reports.

The children of God should be known for their integrity. Those led by the Spirit should live as Jesus Christ said, so that their "yes" means "yes" and their "no" means "no".

Jesus Christ is the truth, and those who follow Him should mirror His character. You promised you would return that tool or that book; you told your boss you would write that report or pull your load or fulfill that responsibility; you promised to return that phone call; you said you would pray or help out or show up at 7:00 p.m., you said you would pay back the money you owe – and so you should.

Honesty is not necessarily exciting stuff, but it does reveal whom you are following.

Those led by the serpent have their citizenship in and loyalty to earth

- Finally, those led by the serpent have their citizenship in and loyalty to earth.

Philippi was a Roman colony. It promoted the Roman way of life, gave Rome a loyal base abroad, and enabled Rome to control outlying regions. Its colonists were proud ambassadors of Rome!

The citizens were to obey the laws of Rome and give honor to the Roman emperor! Their allegiance was to Rome. Their highest hope was to advance in its kingdom.

Those led by the Spirit have their citizenship in and loyalty to heaven

- By contrast, those led by the Spirit have their citizenship in and loyalty to heaven.

Paul wrote to the Philippians, in chapter 3, verse 20a,

For our citizenship is in heaven . . .

Moffat translates it, "We are a colony of heaven."

Those led by the Spirit should be loyal to the honor of our Emperor. We should propagate the message of heaven as loyal ambassadors of Christ.

Our lives should be the epitome of honesty and purity. Our greatest honor will be to serve Him in His kingdom. It has everything to do with whom you are following!

Conclusion

In the final chapter to this Philippian church, chapter 4, Paul writes, in verses 8 and 9,

. . . whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. . . . practice these things . . .

He writes this to believers!

Make up your mind, Christian! Will you act as a citizen of earth or as a citizen of heaven? Will you be led by the alluring, entrancing system of the serpent? Or will you be led by the truth of the Spirit?

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/12/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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