

A Violent Conversion

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[0 : 00] Please turn with me to Acts chapter 16 and verses 11 through 15. Acts chapter 16 verses 11 through 15.

Poor Chankal Lahiri. Last month, Lahiri, an Indian magician, drowned while trying to imitate Hari Houdini's famous water escape.

Wrapped in a straitjacket, chained and shackled, Lahiri was lowered into the cool waters of the Huli River in West Bengal. Lahiri never reappeared and his body was found a couple of days later, having drifted a mile downstream.

Before he went into the water, the magician joked with reporters, saying, If I do this right, it's magic. If I do this wrong, it's tragic.

Well, Lahiri failed to open the six locks with which he was shackled, and as a result, he drowned. The story of the book of Acts is that of God's amazing work of opening things which previously had been locked.

[1 : 24] He has to. If the good news of Jesus as the Christ is going to spread all over the world, and new disciples are going to be made. The story of the book of Acts is that of the Holy Spirit miraculously opening cities and doors and homes and hearts to the gospel.

And unlike Chankal Lahiri, our sovereign God never fails. But when he begins a work, he carries it on until it's complete. One such amazing work of opening takes place in the Roman colony of Philippi, a leading town in the European region known as Macedonia.

In these verses, God is opening a new mission field, the hitherto uncontacted continent of Europe. Having guided Paul, as we saw a few weeks ago, and his companions from where they'd been working in central Turkey, they sailed from the western seaport of Troas.

They crossed the Aegean Sea by way of Samothrace and made landfall at Neapolis. Now, just as Leith is the seaport for Edinburgh, so Neapolis was the seaport for Philippi.

So having walked the ten miles or so from Neapolis to Philippi, the stage is set for God to do an amazing work of opening things which previously had been locked.

[2 : 59] There are four things the Lord miraculously opens in this passage. He opens a city, a door, a heart, and a home. So, this is what God does, never tragically, always successfully, opening things which previously had been closed.

Our prayer today is that just as he unlocked the city of Philippi to hear the good news of Jesus, so he'd unlock Glasgow. But just as he unlocked the heart of Lydia to respond to the gospel, so he'd open closed hearts among us today.

First of all, the Lord opens a city, a city. Philippi occupies a central place in the heart of every Christian. What God did there in Acts 16 inspires us to engage in the mission of the gospel, and what Paul later wrote to the church of the Philippians forms the backbone of an understanding of who Jesus is, what Jesus did, and how the followers of Jesus are to live.

But it all begins here in Acts 16, verse 12, where Paul and his companions, Silas, Timothy, and Luke arrive in Philippi. But what of this place?

Well, in the first instance, Philippi had been a place of great battles. Battles. Formed in the 4th century BC, it was named after its conqueror, Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great.

- [4 : 34] In 42 BC, Octavian, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, fought a battle at Philippi against Brutus and Cassius, the two men who had assassinated his father.

Octavian was triumphant and crowned himself emperor, calling himself Caesar Augustus. Because of the battle of Philippi, the days of the Roman Republic were over, and the days of the Roman Empire had begun.

Philippi had been the scene of one of the most famous battles of the ancient world, that of Octavian against Brutus and Cassius. But even before then, kings had battled here.

It had always been a place of conflict and bloodshed. But now, a greater than Philip or Caesar, Augustus, was arriving at the gates of the city.

Not Paul. Unimpressive Paul. But the message he carries with him. The message of the gospel is that by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, he has conquered sin and death.

- [5 : 44] The battle has been fought. Jesus has triumphed. Paul comes bearing good news of a victory won, and of a victorious saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that message will transform the people of Philippi more drastically than any imperial campaign. Bringing not death, but life.

Not the idolatrous worship of an emperor, but the pure worship of God. Not enslaving the people of Philippi, but liberating them. Make no mistake, this city, which had been the scene of so many important battles in the ancient world, had never encountered a greater power than it did in Jesus Christ.

A power that can unlock things which previously had been closed. But then also, Philippi was a Roman city.

It was a very Roman city. In 31 BC, having defeated Mark Antony and his lover Cleopatra, Caesar Augustus instituted land reforms in Italy, meaning that many Italian farmers moved to cities like Philippi.

- [6 : 55] Philippi became a Roman colony, filled with Roman citizens, especially from Italy itself. It was very much a Roman city. Roman culture, Roman law, Roman transportation.

Roman politics. It was one of the leading cities of the province. Dominated as it was by Roman culture, how is this city going to deal with the gospel?

How will the gospel impact upon the culture and literature of Rome? Upon the power and politics of the legions? Again, make no mistake, this city, which was one of the leading colonies in the district, with its culture and its law and its transportation and its politics, will prove no match to the superior power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Glasgow is no Christian city, if ever it was. It is not even a post-Christian city. I would argue perhaps it is a pre-Christian city, not too dissimilar from Philippi.

The vast majority of Glasgow's peoples have not heard the good news of Jesus Christ. The example of how the gospel penetrated Philippi encourages us to believe that the power of God can overcome our city's ignorance and defiance, and that Glasgow can flourish by the preaching of the word and the praising of God's name, because there is no power that can withstand the force of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the love of God in the good news of his son.

- [8 : 39] Sure, Glasgow is no different from Philippi, really. But God's in the business of opening things which previously had been locked. The Lord opens a city.

But then the Lord also opens a door. He opens a door. Having arrived at Philippi, Paul and his companions stayed there for a few days, presumably doing some fact-finding.

That's what those who are genuinely interested in mission do when they come to a new place. They work out what makes the community in which they're going to be living tick.

They want to study the culture of the place, because they want to proclaim the gospel in a relevant manner. Paul and his companions are in a new culture, on a new continent, and before they're going to speak to Philippi, they're going to listen to Philippi.

I wonder whether one reason our evangelism seems to be so ineffective is that we are failing to understand today's Glasgow. That we assume that the culture of today's Glasgow is exactly the same as yesterday's Glasgow, and therefore we don't need to listen anymore.

[9 : 55] Could that be one reason, perhaps, why our presentation of the gospel at times seems to lack a bit of bite? Well, for a Jewish synagogue to form, you needed ten Jewish males to be committed to the project.

If there were any less than ten Jewish men, a synagogue could not be formed. Well, Philippi did not have a synagogue because it was not a particularly Jewish city. There just weren't that many Jews living there.

Not enough for a synagogue anyway. And yet there were some. Now, to conduct worship, Jewish people needed a supply of water. After all, their worship consisted in ritual washings and ablutions.

And so it was natural that those Jews who did live in Philippi made their way to the river on the Jewish Sabbath to engage in what they called their prayers, what we might call a service of worship.

And so we read in verse 13, Paul and his companions went to where they expected to find Jewish people.

[11 : 11] They went outside the city gate, literally the door of the city, and they found a mission field down beside the river. They might have expected to find one in the city center, in the markets, the meeting places, but no, the first place they went in Philippi was where Paul expected to find Jewish people.

And true to form, the Lord opened the door of the city gates for them, and they went down to the river. It is rather ironic that the man of Macedonia who called in a vision to them while they were still in Asia turned out to be a group of women saying their prayers by a river.

Who knows where God will open a door for mission for us as Christians or as a church? For all our planning and strategizing, we have to be ready for God to open the door in an entirely different direction, call us to minister to an entirely different group of people.

Perhaps Paul and his companions, having received that vision, thought that they'd be proclaiming Christ to the prominent leaders of Philippi. God had other plans because it was his intention to open up Philippi to the gospel in a different way.

Poor Chancellor Lahiri could not open the locks which held his chains in place, and so he drowned. But God is in the business of opening things which previously had been locked.

[12 : 44] Yes, even locked doors. So let's be prayerful, ready to push on the doors of the mission God is opening for us.

Third, the Lord opens a heart. The Lord opens a heart. This passage is perhaps best known for its presentation of the conversion of Lydia. We read, the Lord opened her heart, verse 14.

We think of it as a gentle form of conversion that just like a tiny ray of sunshine brings light to the darkness, and so with the gentleness of the sun's rays. God opens Lydia's heart to the gospel.

I'm not so sure the conversion of Lydia was quite so gentle. Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth, prominent businesswoman. Purple cloth was a much sought-after commodity in the Roman Empire because it was sewn into the robes of leading officials to confer upon them dignity and nobility.

You could buy cheap purple cloth, but the real deal comes from only one place in the entire Roman Empire, Thyatira. Thyatira, in the west of modern-day Turkey, had a roaring trade in purple dye.

[14 : 03] They collected the base ingredient for the dye from a particular kind of shellfish which lived in the water of Thyatira. It was very rare, so very expensive.

The merchants of Thyatira were generally very rich because they were selling an extremely high-class product. So Lydia's one of these merchants. She's a seller of purple cloth, a prominent businesswoman.

Perhaps her husband had died, leaving her to run the business. But we also learn that she was a worshipper of God, verse 14, code for a Gentile who had converted to Judaism.

That's why she's down here at the river, engaging in the prayers and rituals of her chosen religion. Paul and his companions did not target her.

We do not read that they went down to the river to speak to Lydia. Rather, when they arrived there and had adopted the seating position expected of Jewish rabbis and began to speak, she began to listen.

[15 : 10] The NIV does a very good job of translating what happened. She was listening. It wasn't just that Paul said one thing which challenged her and brought her to the point of decision.

It was that she's listening to Paul's entire discourse. The gospel comes to her by the ear as it always does. And then we read, the Lord opened her heart.

As we say, such a beautiful description of someone coming to faith in Jesus. But gentle? I don't think so. The word opened here is the same word used to describe childbirth, the opening of the womb.

An experience, I'm told, is very painful. Not by experience, you understand. When the Lord opened Lydia's heart to the truth of the gospel, it was no less dramatic than when he had opened her womb to give birth to her children.

The world turned upside down for her that day. Her mind was cataclysmically changed and her heart became new. In many ways, the grace of God that converts is violent.

[16 : 25] It's dynamic. The Lord opened something which previously had been locked. Lydia's heart, he moved in power. And what exactly is it that happened? In verse 15, we read that Lydia said to Paul and his companions, if you consider me a believer in the Lord.

What does it mean for the Lord to open someone's heart? It means that on the basis of the word of the gospel proclaimed to them, they now believe in Christ whereas before they did not.

It means they now trust in him for salvation and forgiveness whereas before they did not. Before they did live on their own, even if they played religion, but now they believe, they have faith in the Lord.

In his sovereign grace, the Lord unlocks her heart. That's the kind of thing our God does. That's what he did to the apostle Paul while he was still Saul of Tarsus.

That's what he's done today to millions of people whose hearts once were locked tight against him. But in sovereign grace, God fitted the key of the gospel to the lock of their hearts and opened them up to the truth of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

[17 : 46] That's what we need to pray for. For God to work powerfully again and again and again in sovereign grace. Because we may open the word and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and that is the means by which God will use to open closed hearts.

But unless his spirit is engaged in opening hearts which are locked tightly against him, our proclamation will be entirely as ineffective as firing a water pistol at a nuclear submarine.

If you disciples are going to be made, the Lord must be opening hearts to his gospel. And yes, we must strive for excellence in our proclamation of the word but more than that even, we must pray earnestly for his violent grace to open locked hearts.

In the fourth instance, the Lord opens a city, a door, a heart and then finally he opens a home, a home. You know, we never know what an action might lead, especially when it comes to evangelism or mission.

Who knows what future generations shall be impacted by our proclamation of the word. If the Lord opens the heart of that person, who knows what then shall happen?

[19 : 16] Well, in Lydia's case, the opening of her heart led to the opening of her home. Verse 15. We read there of what this looked like. That even as the Lord had access to the secret places of her heart, he now has access to the secret places of her home.

In the first place, we read that she and her household were baptized. They were baptized, having believed she was baptized. When someone believes in the gospel of Jesus Christ, they are baptized, signifying they're being washed in the blood of Jesus and becoming members of Christ's covenant community.

We find multiple accounts of baptisms through the book of Acts, and Lydia's was the first baptism to be conducted upon the continent of Europe.

Since then, there have been billions, but this was the first here in Acts 16, verse 15. But notice, please, not only was she baptized, so was her household.

And her household represents her family and her servants. They're all baptized. A text like this presents significant difficulties to a Credo Baptist position.

[20 : 38] Namely, that the only people who should be baptized are those who profess their faith. We do not read in this passage that everyone in Lydia's household believed the message for themselves.

All we read is that the head of the household, Lydia, having believed, the rest of the household were baptized. They were baptized on the strength of her profession of faith, just as we in the historic Reformed Church baptize our infants upon the basis of their parents' profession of faith.

faith. It's the household that becomes Christian. It is included in Christ's covenant and dedicated to him. And I want to challenge us all here, especially if we have not yet been baptized or we have not yet had our children baptized.

It's often been said that the New Testament nowhere advocates the baptism of the children of believers or the baptism of anyone on the basis of the profession of another person's faith.

Well, that's not true. Because what's happening here in Acts 16, verse 15, with this household baptism, is what the historic church has always practiced and believed, that both believers and their households are to be baptized into the name of Jesus Christ.

[22 : 09] Perhaps, rather than speak of an infant baptism position, we should speak of a covenant baptism position, where ourselves, having been baptized by the profession of faith, baptize our infant children, knowing that God sets a seal of approval on our families.

In the second place, notice how Lydia opens her home and she offers hospitality to Paul and her companions. In fact, she begs them. She's a business woman, she's trained in sales, and her persuasion works, and Paul and his companions enjoy her hospitality.

Paul's been the means by which the Lord's opened her heart. Why then should she hold back her home and hospitality from him? The opening of someone's home is a sign that someone's heart has been opened by the Lord.

That's something we can all do, whoever we are. We all have homes we live in. Can we express our gratitude to the Lord who opened our hearts by opening our homes to one another? It has often been said that an Englishman's home is his castle.

Now, we're not English, we're Scots, but the same is often true of us, that the drawbridge to our homes is almost certainly closed. Does this also indicate the drawbridge of our hearts is almost certainly closed?

[23 : 31] Where do we expect to spend eternity? In our Father's home. Why can't we use then the homes he's given us here to show hospitality to those who are lonely and overwhelmed?

Even if it just should be offering a cup of coffee, a strupag and some friendship. And in the third place, notice that Lydia now has evangelistic intent.

Evangelistic intent. Why does Lydia offer Paul and her companions hospitality in her house in Philippi? Not just because she's grateful to them, but because she wants to use her home as a base for gospel mission.

She doesn't want Paul and his companions to be worrying about temporal things while in Philippi, but focus rather on the mission of the gospel. She's a prominent businesswoman. She has the resources necessary to feed them and house them, to take care of their physical needs, freeing them up to focus their attention on preaching and the evangelism of Philippi.

We don't read that she ever accompanies them on their evangelistic journeys through Philippi, that she shares a podium with Paul and gives her testimony. me. But we do read that she does what she can.

[24 : 52] She provides for their temporal needs, freeing Paul and his companions up to proclaim the gospel in Philippi without worrying where they're going to get their next meal or where they're going to sleep that evening.

She does what she can. Having an evangelist to content is not just a matter of being able to speak about Christ to others, but doing what we can to ensure that others, whom God has gifted in different ways than us, are freed up to speak for Christ.

Because without Lydia's hospitality and evangelistic intent, Paul and his companions, in all probability, would not have been able to sustain their ministry in Philippi.

We wouldn't have the book of Philippians, and Philippi would not have had a church. I heard someone say that alongside every powerful movement of the church in its preaching, there have always been gifted people, funding, guiding the work, business people.

And they are no less vital in mission than the evangelists themselves. When the Lord opened Lydia's heart, he also opened her home and her resources.

[26 : 13] She did the most evangelistic thing she could. The Lord used her evangelistic intent to open the hearts of yet more people in Philippi. And I wonder whether you could be the Lydia, Glasgow City Free Church needs, if it's going to reach Glasgow's peoples with God's gospel.

Well, poor Chankal Lahiri, the Indian magician drowned last month, having failed to open the locks of the chain fastened round his body.

But God is the master of opening things which previously had been locked. He's here today by his Holy Spirit through his word. Is he opening your heart to himself?

Let us pray. Lord, we thank you for that wonderful account of the conversion of Lydia.

And we thank you for the wonderful sovereign way in which your grace, that grace proclaimed in the gospel of your son, Jesus Christ, opened the heart of that lady.

[27 : 26] And Lord, we pray for the same grace to open our hearts today. So that what Lydia experienced back then, we would experience today. We pray that for ourselves and for our city, especially for our families.

In Jesus' name. Amen.