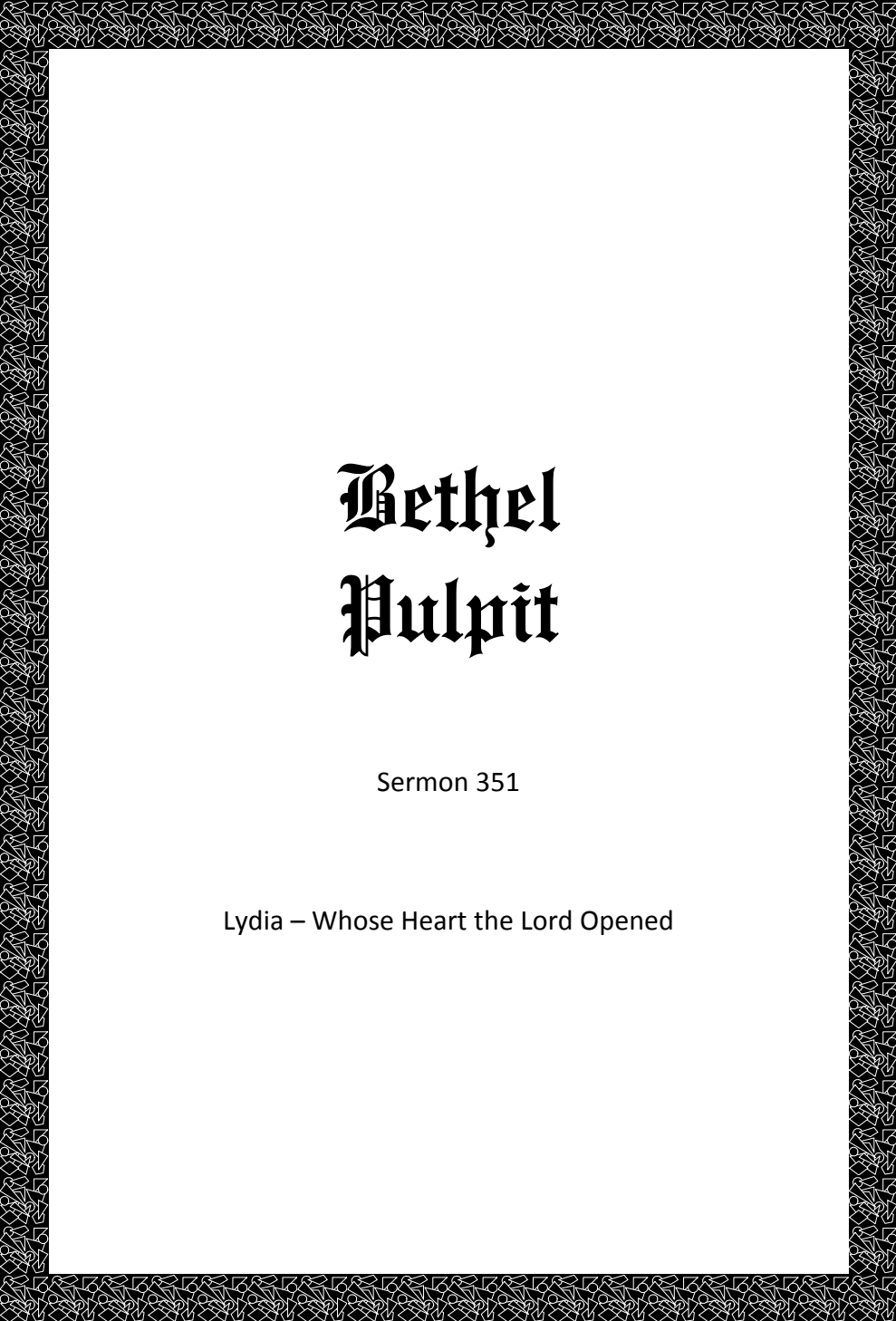




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 351

Lydia – Whose Heart the Lord Opened

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 21st September, 2014**

Text: *“And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul. And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us” (Acts 16. 14, 15).*

There is one thing that stands out right through this chapter: that the Holy Spirit was completely in charge. I think that is the reason why some people think our translators give a wrong title. They should have called this Book *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*, not *The Acts of the Apostles*. But this chapter from beginning to end is full of the acts of the Holy Spirit.

Now beloved friends, we have an account here of how the gospel was first preached in Europe, and it is very clear that Paul had no thoughts whatever of crossing over into Europe to preach the gospel there. What a mercy that in the everlasting purposes of God the gospel, even from early days, had to come to unworthy sinners in Europe! It would seem that probably down the ages since this chapter there have been more people blessed under the preaching of the gospel in Europe than in any other part of the world.

So we have Paul preaching and we are told that “when they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia,” they “were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the Word in Asia” – that is Asia Minor. The mystery of God’s sovereignty! And then again, “After they were come to Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not.” It seems that Paul had come to a very strange time in his life. He had been travelling about. He had been wonderfully blessed. Wherever he had gone, the Word had had free course and been glorified, and then the Lord stops him and stops him again, and it seems Paul hardly knew what he had to do and where he had to go. Now he waited on the Lord, and the Lord very clearly led him, appeared for him. He did not leave him in uncertainty. He had a vision in the night and he could see a man from Macedonia. That was the other side of the Aegean Sea, over in Greece.

He must have recognised him as a man of Macedonia either by his speech or his dress, and he was beckoning to him. He said, "Come over into Macedonia, and help us."

This is interesting: Paul said, "Immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them." The man of Macedonia never mentioned any gospel. He said, "Come and help us." Now Paul did not think of sending money or sending food or something for their warmth or something for their comfort. If they needed help, well, "Assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them." So if words mean anything at all, the most blessed way in which lost, ruined, humanity can ever be helped is through the preaching of the everlasting gospel. It brings divine help. It brings saving help. It brings eternal help.

So immediately there was Paul's obedience, loosing from Troas, sailing across the sea, coming into Macedonia, and they arrived at the chief city, Philippi. Now this is remarkable. What happened when Paul arrived there? Nothing. Had he been deceived? Had he been mistaken? He had had a remarkable revelation in the night. You would think that all the people would have been waiting there for him and asking him to speak to them of what happened when he arrived there. Nothing! God's ways are not our ways. I am sure some of you at times come into unusual circumstances. You feel the Lord has led you, and you venture, and it all seems to be called into question. But Paul was not mistaken. Do you know what was going to be the result of all this? Well, if you want to, read through the whole of that blessed Epistle to the Philippians. This was the foundation of the church at Philippi, which seems to be the most blessed of all the churches to which Paul wrote his Epistles. We think of that hymn:

"Behold, from what beginnings small
Our great salvation rose."

Lydia, the demented woman, the fierce, wild jailer, and that blessed church. How kindly Paul wrote to it! He did not have the faults to find with it that he did with most of the others.

But entering into Philippi he said, "We were in that city abiding certain days." So it was quite a time, but there was nothing happening. O

what little beginnings to it all! “On the Sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted thither.” There must have been something going on with those women, and yet there was only one of them really affected. How many there were or how many there were not, we are not told, but there was only one of them really affected, and yet there were people gathering together for prayer. O the mystery of divine sovereignty! But it has been remarked as a lesson and an encouragement to our churches. You see just a few women in a country where the gospel had never been preached. What did they do? They were not satisfied with any second best. They prayed, and the Lord sent them the Apostle Paul. May it be an encouragement. It seemed an impossible case for these women, whoever they were, but they prayed and the Lord answered their prayers and He sent them the Apostle Paul.

“And a certain woman named Lydia.” She was loved with an everlasting love. Her name was in the Book of Life. It seems she had some measure of light because we are told she worshipped God, but she did not really know the truth. And this was the appointed moment when this woman ordained to eternal life was going to be abundantly blessed.

“A certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira.” Those who study ancient history tell us that Thyatira was noted for two things: this wonderful purple dye which was highly esteemed in countries in those days, and along with that, purple cloth. Obviously she was a merchant woman and she was journeying and she was from Thyatira. That was one of those places where Paul had been refused to go to preach the gospel. The Lord ensured that this one woman Lydia at the time should not be in Thyatira; she should be at Philippi. A divine, eternal covenant appointment where these two should meet.

“Yea, He decreed the very place
Where He would show triumphant grace.”

Perhaps some of you think of your spiritual beginnings. What were you doing on that evening and why were you there and why did this person come along to meet you? I often think of my early beginnings, that cold November evening many years ago, why I should be wandering in the middle of the town and why at the same time there should be this man also wandering through the town, and why the two of us should meet, and the

word he spoke like an arrow in my heart that I could never get out till the Lord in mercy relieved me. I am sure many of you can go to your spots and places. Why were you there? Why did you meet that person?

“A certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us.” Now this is it; this is the vital point this morning: “Whose heart the Lord opened.” None of us have any true religion until the Lord opens our hearts, and my desire is that there may be a few Lydias here this morning and the Lord will open your heart; or there are Lydias here whose hearts have been already opened, and I am sure many of those of you who have been in the way for many years, you would not mind the Lord opening your heart again to receive the truth in the love of it as Lydia did. This is the powerful, sovereign, effectual work of the Holy Spirit in salvation.

“Whose heart the Lord opened.” Because by nature our hearts are not opened hearts; they are closed hearts. Our hearts by nature are hard and dead and they are closed. They are closed to the things of God; they are closed to sacred influences; they are closed to the truth that is preached; they are closed to God’s holy Word; they are closed to the solemn warnings; they are closed to all that is spoken about Christ. This is our heart by nature, dead in trespasses and sins, a carnal heart, a ruined heart, a sinful heart, a guilty heart, and it is closed. Now our hearts are not closed to other things. They are not closed to the world; they are not closed to our carnal desires; they are not closed to sin; they are not closed to Satan. O our hearts are open, wide open, to all these things – to every influence, to everything that is wrong, to everything that is amiss. They may even be open to religion; they may even be open to morality; but our hearts are closed to Christ.

When the Saviour was born at Bethlehem, there was no room for Him in the inn. They had room for all kinds of other things, but there was no room for our incarnate God and Saviour. “He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not.” And as it was then, so it is now, and not only in the world, but our hearts are like that crowded inn at Bethlehem – no room for Christ. Now when the new birth takes place, God opens our hearts. There are many things, many ways of explaining it, but the vital thing is this: there is room there for Christ.

There was with Lydia here. There was room for the Saviour. “Whose heart the Lord opened.”

“Is there a place within your heart
That none but Christ can fill?
He’s God, and therefore can give rest;
He’s love, and therefore will.”

O it is a wonderful thing if you have a place in your heart and nothing but Christ can fill it. What William Cowper says: “An aching void the world can never fill,” whether it is a sudden work or a gradual work, whether it is very powerful or whether it is very gentle. O that place in your heart, your heart opened by the Spirit of God to receive the truth, to receive its warnings, and to receive what it says about your lost condition and your danger! And then O that empty heart, and you will know what it is to say in a right way:

“O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for Thee.”

That is not Arminianism, beloved friends. It is the language of a living soul. It is the language of a Lydia, “whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.”

That is an interesting point: “the things which were spoken of Paul.” We are not told what these things were, but we have not any doubt what they were, reading Paul’s epistles. He says, “For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” We are sure that is the gospel that he preached to these few women by the river side at Philippi.

“The Saviour died, and by His blood
Brought rebel sinners near to God.”

The Saviour, almighty, the Son of God from all eternity, equal with the Father, equal with the Holy Ghost, yet becoming a real Man; living that holy, spotless life that it might be reckoned to a sinner who has no righteousness of his own, but who longs for one; shedding His precious blood that sinners might be forgiven. Paul must have preached this and so much more to Lydia. And shall we say, if you have an opened heart, then you will drink it in. “She attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.” They used to speak years ago of a congregation with their necks on

the stretch. Well, I believe years ago at least at one place I did notice this. Even physically a lot of very old, godly women, they were really leaning forward as if they could not get near enough to the pulpit. But it is in the spirit of it – necks on the stretch.

“I must have Christ as All in all,
Or sink in ruin, guilt, and thrall.”

“Whose heart the Lord opened.” It is that gracious touch. The Holy Spirit touches a sinner’s heart and then that heart is opened. And there is so much in the Word of God about a touch: how the Lord touched Elijah under the juniper tree, and what that meant; how He touched Daniel and put strength in him; and when the Lord Jesus was here on earth, all these different ones He touched and the effect of it. We sing:

“When Jesus’ gracious hand
Has touched our eyes and ears.”

This is what we want. We pray for this, those of you whose hearts have never been touched by the Spirit of God, that they might be touched today. But some of us who trust our hearts have been touched, but often we feel the hardness and the deadness and the darkness. We want the Lord to come again just as He came to Lydia here and to touch our hearts with love divine.

“Whose heart the Lord opened.” An opened heart is a soft heart. Don’t we have hard hearts by nature – hard and barren, rocky, hearts of stone! And we cannot soften them. I will tell you this: if your religion is real, you will not be satisfied with a hard heart. You will long for that word to be fulfilled: “I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.” O may the Lord in love and mercy open our hearts and make them soft.

“Whose heart the Lord opened.” When the Lord opens a sinner’s heart, it becomes impressionable – not like the stone, more like the wax when it is softened. The Word of God makes an impression, and the solemn warnings make an impression, and the truth makes an impression, and the name of Christ makes an impression, and the finished work of the Saviour makes an impression. Tell me, does the preaching ever make an impression on your heart, or do you go just as you came?

“Whose heart the Lord opened.” If the Lord opens your heart, He will open your eyes. Before, you were blind spiritually, but you will see things now you never saw before. With that opened heart and opened eyes you will see the vanity of the world. You will see something of your sin and danger and your great need. O but you will see something of the blessedness of the people of God. “Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee, O people saved by the Lord!” You will cling and cleave to the people of God as Lydia did here. You will cling and cleave to the truth. O but your eyes will be opened to see your need of a Saviour and to have a glimpse of Him and at length to “see the King in His beauty.”

“Whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.” If the Lord opens your heart, then He will open your ears. Some people cannot understand that. The Lord Jesus said, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” Well, we have all got ears in this chapel, but by nature spiritually we have not got any ears, or we have got, shall we say, deaf ears or closed ears. Solemn thing – we can hear the glorious truths of the gospel and the awful warnings of the Word of God and they have no effect. Sometimes we look back to our unregenerate days, the faithful, godly ministers we heard, and the things they said, and why didn’t we tremble or why didn’t we rejoice? We heard them and perhaps we heard them with interest, and perhaps we heard them with approbation. Spiritually we heard them with deaf ears. That is, we did not hear them at all. “And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity.” What day? The gospel day. What day? The day when the Holy Spirit touches that heart and opens that heart.

“Whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.” One of the last times I heard old Mr. Gascoigne at the anniversary at Haslingden, I do not think it was his text or part of his sermon, but I think in his reading something came in about Lydia, and in his quaint way he said, “Three things with Lydia.” And if I have got them right, if I have remembered since being a teenager, he said there were three things with Lydia: *attention, attraction, affection*. There was a lot of good divinity there. It was a good little sermon in three words on this text.

There was *attention*, and when the Holy Spirit opens your heart there will be attention. Perhaps you say, I have always listened. You listen for yourself now; you listen for eternity now. Sometimes at a railway station the loudspeaker says, “Attention,” and it begins speaking about someone who has lost something. Well, in one sense you all listen, but it is that person who has lost something who is really paying attention to the announcement. Somebody has lost something. Perhaps it is a briefcase with something valuable in, or something like that. At first everyone seems to listen, but if you have not lost a briefcase with something valuable in it, that is the end of it. Can you see the point, beloved friends? There are two ways of paying attention. “She *attended* unto the things which were spoken of Paul.”

And then *attraction*. I have always felt that attraction in Christ is one of the best marks of the work of the Spirit of God in our hearts. You can have this and that, and imaginary words, and looking at your beginnings, and you cannot see this and that, but if there is a sweet attraction in the Saviour. I think I have told you of an old friend of mine who was abundantly blessed, and then later he was tried by Satan that it might have been emotion, it might have been imagination, but he was enabled to lay hold on this point: sweet attraction in Christ. Satan never makes Christ attractive to a sinner. It is this: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.” It is this: Christ lifted up, as the old preachers used to say, on the gospel pole, the pole of the everlasting gospel. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.” The serpent in the wilderness, and he bid the dying look to it and live. O what an attraction there was for those who were serpent-bitten and were wounded and were in pain and who were dying! Now there was not the same attraction for those who had never been bitten by the serpent (was there?)

“Jesus, thus for sinners smitten,
Wounded, bruised, serpent-bitten,
To His cross directs their faith.”

And as many as looked lived. O do you see an attraction in the cross of Christ?

“Whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.” Attention, attraction, *affection*. And it was

to Christ and it was to Paul and it was to his ministry and it was to the people of God. And she showed her affection when she was baptized. It does not talk about it as if there was an *if* or a *but* or a time or anything. The Lord had blessed her. “I will run the way of Thy commandments, when Thou shalt enlarge my heart.” Let us be clear, an opened heart is an enlarged heart. “I will run the way of Thy commandments, when Thou shalt enlarge my heart.”

“And when she was baptized” – affection, that loving obedience, because Paul must have been preaching baptism to her. “What doth hinder me to be baptized?” “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” “And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us.” One thing, it seems that Lydia having been blessed, she did not want to part with Paul. She wanted to hear more of the glorious grace of God, and so will you. The gospel satisfies. You do not want something else, something different. You still want the glories of the gospel. But she clung and clave to the people of God. Again, that is a good religion that clings and cleaves to the people of God, as Ruth did to Naomi. “But Ruth clave unto her.” “Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.” Have you a religion like that? You want to be numbered with the people of God now and you want to be numbered with them to all eternity.

But there are some quite striking expressions here. “She *besought* us”; “she *constrained* us.” In one sense she could not do enough for them. It would appear she was a woman of some wealth if she was a seller of purple. She could not do enough for them. She besought them; she constrained them. She wanted to entertain them. She wanted to help them. But you know what the secret of it all is: “The love of Christ constraineth us.”

Well, beloved friends, may we know the Holy Spirit’s gracious, loving, almighty work amongst us as He dealt with Lydia those many years ago at Philippi, and may we know the gracious effect, the opened heart and the obedience of faith and love and the attention and the attraction and the affection.

“And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul. And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us.”