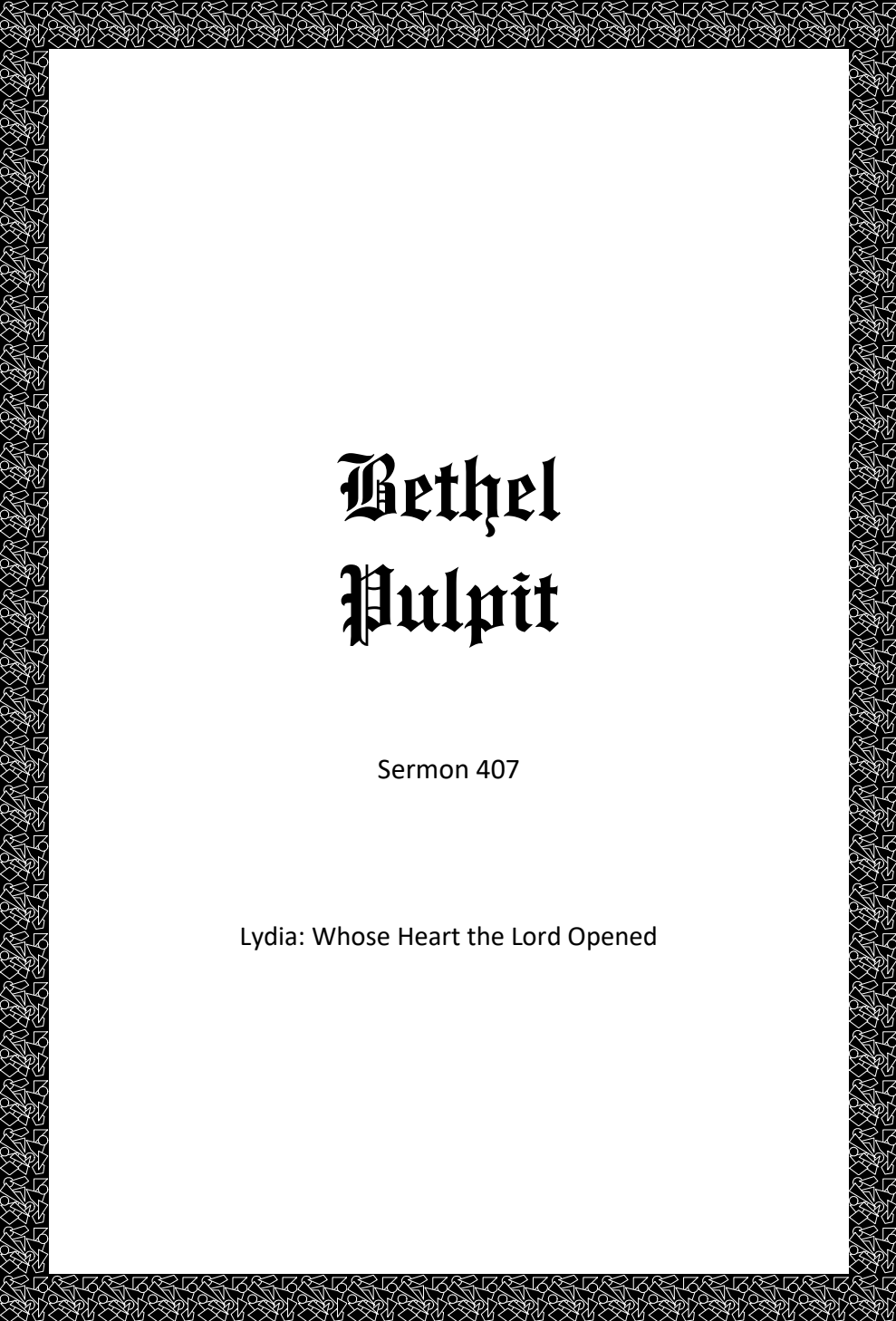




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 407

Lydia: Whose Heart the Lord Opened

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 24th March, 2019**

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” (Acts 16. 14).*

This morning we spoke of Ruth; this evening it is Lydia. Both of them are in heaven. Both of them were loved with that same everlasting love from all eternity. Their names alike were written in the book of life. They were ordained to salvation, to heaven at last, and all entirely on the grounds of God's free and sovereign grace. One was in the Old Testament; one many years later in the New Testament. But it is the same grace and the same salvation, and both of them in time were brought to know it and to experience it. The Lord found them out, and the Lord revealed Himself to them. The strange thing is, in both cases there seemed to be that question: well, they were the children of God in His eternal purposes, but now personally, feelingly, “How shall I put thee among the children?”

The whole of the beginning of this chapter is mysterious. Paul wanted to be led and he thought he would go here, but the Lord said, “No.” He thought he would go somewhere else, but the Lord said, “No.” He had no idea of coming to Philippi. The gospel had never been preached in Europe before. He had to go there. There was “a certain woman named Lydia” who seemed to be visiting the city at that time, and he must be there. There must be that meeting place between Paul and Lydia, though neither the one nor the other had heard of each other. God's purposes can never be overthrown, and they “ripened fast, unfolding hour by hour.”

But let me just remind you of what seemed to be the strange, mysterious leading and the difficulties. Paul and his friends went “throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the Word in Asia.” It is a solemn word. Very mysterious are the leadings of God – mysterious when the Lord closes a door and when the Lord forbids the gospel to be preached in that place. They “were forbidden ... to preach the Word in Asia.” That, of course, is referring to Asia Minor, where later there were the seven churches in the Book of the Revelation, what nowadays we would call Turkey.

They were forbidden to preach the Word of God there in Asia. But there was a certain woman named Lydia whose home was in Asia. She belonged to the city of Thyatira, which was in Asia. And Paul was not allowed to preach there, but the Lord ensured that when he came to Philippi, that this woman Lydia was away from her home and was there visiting Philippi.

O the mysterious transactions of grace! Sometimes perhaps without thought you go somewhere and you meet a person, and the whole of your life is changed afterward. You young ones especially – with the Lord’s leadings in providence, do not try to force a way. If the Lord closes one way, He will open another. Seek that He might lead you – in the great things of your life, but also in the little things of your life. There is nothing too small to bring before Him as well as nothing too great. Do not forget,

“Our life’s minutest circumstance
Is subject to His eye.”

Then, “after they were come to Mysia, they assayed” – that is attempted – “to go into Bithynia.” Another mysterious word, yet a solemn word: “The Spirit suffered them not.” We know now there was a woman who had been brought to the city of Philippi, and the appointed day of her salvation was coming nearer, and Paul could not be in Asia and could not be in Bithynia if the appointed time was going to come in Philippi. O the mysterious leadings of God in providence and in grace!

“And they passing by Mysia came down to Troas.” Beloved friends, it seems as you read this chapter, that Paul was completely bewildered. He had his plans. They were all overturned. He was afraid to move, but the Lord had not yet shown him what to do. Perhaps some of you find that at times. Your plans are overturned. You are not shown exactly what to do. You are like Elijah. He saw the Brook Cherith. He knew the Lord had sent him there. He could see every day there was less water in the brook, and it was drying up. But the Lord knew what He would do. He had a widow woman prepared. The time came, but not till it was needed.

“He tarries oft till men are faint,
And comes at evening late.”

Then, “I have commanded a widow woman *there*.” What an emphasis there is on that word *there*! The Holy Spirit had appointed it. Lydia seems

to have been a woman of some eminence, but He had appointed her *there*, and these two must meet.

But in a vision the Lord appeared to Paul. “There stood a man of Macedonia.” That was just across the way, across that narrow sea. It was going into Europe for the first time. Blessed be God that the gospel was sent to Europe! Paul had no thoughts of going to Europe.

I want to speak carefully, but it seems that perhaps the greatest number of the Lord’s people since the days of the apostles have been found in Europe. I suppose Paul recognised the man in this vision either by his appearance or his speech. “There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us. And ... immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them.”

Now listen to this. This man said, “Come ... and help us.” Paul assuredly gathered “that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them.” The man of Macedonia never mentioned the gospel. He wanted help. Paul did not think of sending them money or provisions. He knew the best way that unworthy sinners can ever be helped is through the preaching of the everlasting gospel. There is a lot of the opposite today – so many of these social ventures in the professing churches, and they are good as far as they go, but it is “assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel.”

So they set sail. They went to Troas and further on, and then they came to Philippi, the chief city. Do you know what happened when they got there? Nothing. There seems to be a lot to me in that word: “We were in that city abiding certain days.” I should think Paul expected something very wonderful, something very amazing. He knew what wonderful things were, amazing things. He must always have remembered the road to Damascus when he was struck down in a moment. Was this going to be another such thing? It seems there was nothing happening.

Then the Sabbath day came. They went out casually. Was there any religion there at all? By the river side they saw a few women. It seems these women were proselytes to the Jewish religion. Lydia was one of them. We are told she “worshipped God.” She had been brought away from idolatry. She knew who the true God was. They had a measure of

light and they were met together. Are you familiar with Paul's Epistle to the Philippians, the blessedness of it, the blessedness of that church? This was the beginning of it – a few poor women meeting. They had nobody to preach to them by the river side.

“Behold, from what beginnings small
Our great salvation rose.”

Never despise the day of small things, either in the church of God or in your own heart. It does not matter if they are small things, so long as they are real.

“And on the Sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made.” It has been mentioned that these women there had not got any preacher. They did not accept a second best. They prayed, and the Lord answered their prayers, and He sent them the Apostle Paul. May that be an encouragement to our congregations who are so troubled because of the lack of a minister on the Lord's day. They were, and they prayed, and the Lord sent them the Apostle Paul. So you see all these mysterious purposes. The Lord had not made a mistake. There was an appointed person, there was an appointed place, there was an appointed time, and His purposes *did* ripen fast, unfolding every hour.

“And a certain woman” – this woman Lydia whose name was in the book of life, who had been loved from all eternity, and the appointed time had come. We are told that she worshipped God. Whether she was really brought to a knowledge of the truth yet, we do not know; the Scriptures are silent. But she did know something, and she was to become the first member of that blessed church at Philippi. She would be brought to understand one of the first words that Paul wrote to them in his Epistle: “Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” That is exactly what He did for Lydia here. May it be a word in season to some of you. You feel the Lord is dealing with you, but there is so much uncertainty, so little you know. You do not know how to act, what to think, where to turn. “Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.”

“A certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira.” I understand that Thyatira in ancient times was renowned above

other places for this sale of purple, and it was extremely valued in ancient times, both the making of purple dye and also, following that, purple cloth which was being sold. So it seems that Lydia was some kind of merchant woman. As we read on towards the end of the chapter, she seems to have been a woman of some means. “A certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us.” These two are brought together. Nothing can hinder God’s purpose.

Then this is the vital point in the verse: “*Whose heart the Lord opened.*” That was the vital thing with Lydia, and beloved friends, it is the vital thing for you and me. By nature our hearts are closed – closed to God, closed to His Word, closed to the influences of His grace. When Adam was created in Eden, his heart was open – open to his God. He walked in the garden in loving union and communion with Him. But when sin entered the world, and death by sin, his heart was closed. It was not a tender heart, an impressionable heart. It was a hard heart, a closed heart. Every one of us in this chapel was born with this hard heart. We can come to chapel, but we are closed against the effect of the Word, closed against the influences of the Holy Spirit. It is a solemn thing. Our hearts are not closed to sin, not closed to the world, not closed to Satan, not closed to his influences, not closed to the pleasures of this life. But there is that realisation that our hearts are shut to God, our hearts are closed against Him.

And beloved friends, it is only the Lord who can open a sinner’s heart. Paul could not open Lydia’s heart, and she could not open her own heart. It is only the Lord in His mercy and the riches of His grace can open a sinner’s heart. You might say, What do we mean by the heart? Well, the whole of a person’s being, especially that person’s will, that person’s affections. When the new birth takes place, the Lord comes by His blessed Spirit and He opens that heart. The first thing that flows into it is everlasting life. It can never be destroyed. O but there are so many things when the Lord opens a sinner’s heart. He opens his thoughts, his desires. He opens that sinner to the sacred influences, the effect of God’s Word, the solemn warnings, the beauties of the gospel. That heart is opened to receive those things which were rejected, which were not known before.

“*Whose heart the Lord opened.*” An open heart is a tender heart, a soft heart. That promise is fulfilled when the Lord graciously opens a

sinner's heart: "I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh." In the fourth chapter of the Song of Solomon, there is mention of the opening of a sinner's heart. We read that the Lord "put in His hand by the hole of the door," and she says, "My bowels were moved for Him" – something moving, something flowing. It is the love of Christ which is shed abroad by the Holy Ghost.

"Whose heart the Lord opened." And when the Lord opens a sinner's heart, He opens his eyes. They were blind before, but now he can see, and with those open eyes he sees his need. We need to be careful. Every sinner will see his need, but some see it perhaps more gently, and some more suddenly. You cannot help contrasting Lydia here and then the jailer at the end of the chapter. We read of one "whose heart the Lord opened," and the other, he was trembling and he was ready to take his own life. He was falling down in his helplessness. But your eyes will be opened to see your need, because you have sinned against God and you need a Saviour. You will see these things, and you will see the vanity of the world as Ruth did, and you will see the blessedness of the people of God as Ruth did, and you will see the solemnity of eternity, and you will see the beauty in Christ that you should desire Him.

"Whose heart the Lord opened." But when the Lord opens a sinner's heart, it is that He Himself might enter.

"Unworthy dwelling! glorious Guest!
Favour astonishing, divine!"

You remember when the Lord Jesus was born at Bethlehem, we read that there was no room for Him in the inn. Solemn word! And that is you, that is me by nature. We have room in our hearts for all kinds of things, idols, but we have no room for the Saviour. But when the Lord opens your heart, there is a place made there, and none but Christ can fill it. Let me appeal to you, yes or no, have you got room in your heart for the Saviour? It was not there by nature. Who put it there? You may try to fill it with other things, but if the Lord has created that space in your heart, only Christ can fill it. It is a wonderful blessing when the Lord comes to enter into a sinner's heart and He comes there to bless, and He comes to abide there for ever. "Which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." Not just Christ in the Bible, and not just Christ in your mind, in your thoughts, but it is "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

“Whose heart the Lord opened.” Have you got a sweet hope that the Lord *has* opened your heart, that you *do* feel your need as a sinner, that you *cannot* do without the Saviour? You do want Him to come and abide with you for ever. Perhaps very tenderly and feelingly, on mercy’s ground, you can venture to say,

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

That is the religion that takes a sinner to heaven.

“Whose heart the Lord opened.” O that unworthy heart, but the Lord enters and He abides and He takes possession for Himself. So her ears were opened, “that she attended unto the things which were spoken.” I believe her mouth was opened to pray, and so will yours. It is one mark of an open heart, a mouth opened in prayer. Saul of Tarsus, his heart was closed, but when the Lord opened his heart, “Behold, he prayeth.”

“Whose heart the Lord opened.” I heard Mr. Gascoigne preach at Haslingden when I was a boy, and I am not sure whether he took this as his text. There were the three services. At the morning service, unusually he used to read a chapter, and then make comments till about half-past eleven, going up to twelve, and then the second hymn. But he said this about Lydia, “whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended to the things which were spoken of Paul.” He said there were three things: attention, attraction, affection. Those three things are present whenever a sinner’s heart is opened. There will be that attention. You will attend to the Word as you never did before, because you are hearing for life, you are hearing for eternity. So there will be attention. And then there will be attraction. There will be an attraction in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. You will see Him as the one thing needful. You will want Him to be yours. And then there will be affection, though sometimes you are tried how little you do love. But at times, and I think especially at the beginning, with that opened heart you will be able to say, “Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee.”

“Whose heart the Lord opened.” Attention; attraction; affection. Now in a sense, that is the end of the text, but it is not the end of the subject, because there are two things mentioned afterwards. “And when she was baptized.” So as she was brought to be a true believer on the Son

of God, because her heart was opened that as a sinner she might trust in Christ, believe on Him to the salvation of her soul, she openly professed it. “Whose heart the Lord opened.... And when she was baptized.”

And then secondly, there was the sanctifying effect. Her life was never the same again. Wherever the Lord opens a sinner’s heart, that sinner’s life is never the same again. Immediately she could not do enough for Paul and his friends who had been made such a blessing to her. And she said – and this was the sanctifying effect of the grace of God as her heart was now softened and flowing out in love to Paul – “If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there.” If the Lord comes to abide in your heart, you will long for Him to abide in your house. “And she constrained us.”

Right at the end, after all these other things, when they came out of prison, this time there were a few more of them. They had the jailer as well. “They ... entered into the house of Lydia,” and they saw the brethren. So the Holy Ghost ends the chapter speaking of Lydia and those comforted in her house, and they are spoken of under this beautiful title: “the brethren.” All this flows from “whose heart the Lord opened.” When you get home, you can read all the four chapters in the Epistle to the Philippians, and you can see it all flowing from that beginning.

“Whose heart the Lord opened.”