

Lydia

The Woman Who Was Diligent in Business

Scripture References: Acts 16:12-15, 40; Philippians 1:1-10

Name Meaning: Lydia, who was an Asiatic, derived her name from the country on the borders of which her native city, Thyatira, was situated. It was not an original Greek name, but probably Phoenician, and a common name meaning "bending." Readers of Horace will be familiar with Lydia as a popular name for women. There are those writers who think that it means "The Lydian," seeing Thyatira was a city of Lydia, and that her personal name is unknown.

Family Connections: Scripture does not supply us with any information regarding Lydia's background apart from the fact that she lived in Thyatira which was one of the Macedonian colonies. From names discovered on monuments it is evident that the city was the melting pot of many nations, and that the chief object of worship was Apollo, who was worshiped as the sun-god under the name of Tyrinnus. There was also a strong Jewish element in the city maintaining faith in Jehovah. Lydia, one of the prominent women of Thyatira, is presented to us in various ways, namely:

As a Business Woman

Thyatira was conspicuous for its many guilds which were united by common pursuits and religious rites. One of these guilds was that of dyers. The water of the area was so well-adapted for dyeing, that no other place could produce the scarlet cloth out of which fezzes were so brilliantly and so permanently dyed. This unique purple dye brought the city universal renown. Lydia was a well-known seller of this product (Acts 16:14), and typifies a successful business woman in a prosperous city. Ability, enthusiasm, singleness of purpose and mental acumen were hers, and she prospered greatly in an honorable and extensive calling of "selling purple." Lydia was an example of the comparatively independent position some women attained to in Asia Minor. That she became prosperous in business is seen in that she owned a spacious home, and had servants to care for her.

As a Devout Woman

While it is not certain whether Lydia was of Jewish descent it is evident that she was a Jewish proselyte. "She worshipped God," we are told. Often business people are so engrossed in their affairs as to have no time for religion. But Lydia, in spite of all her secular obligations, found time to worship according to the Jewish faith.

Daily she made her way to the riverside where prayer was wont to be made. She knew that in order to successfully meet the stiff competition of the Philippian traders, she needed grace as well as knowledge. At that riverside prayer meeting perhaps she met other Jewish dyers, and with them eagerly waited upon the ministry of Paul and his companions.

As a Seeking Woman

Although sincerely religious, Lydia was not a Christian. She did, however, have a hunger for a deeper spiritual experience. The mind is closed against the full truth either from ignorance or prejudice and cannot discern it, or from pride and perversity and will not admit it. Ignorance was responsible for Lydia's closed mind, but as she attended to the truth of Christ which Paul spoke of in conversational style in that small seated Jewish gathering, the light dawned, and her heart opened to receive that Christ as her Saviour. As Chrysostom puts it, "To open is the part of God, and to pay attention that of the woman." Her faith was born through hearing the Word of God (Psalm 119:18, 130; Luke 24:45).

As a Christian Woman

As an evidence of her surrender to the claims of Christ she was baptized, "the waters of Europe then first being sacramentally used to seal her faith and God's forgiveness in Christ." Her conversion was declared by a public confession, and such was her enthusiasm that she immediately told her household what had happened, and all within it likewise believed and were baptized as disciples of the same Saviour. Thus Lydia had the honor of being Paul's first European convert--the forerunner of a mighty host to honor the Lord. Becoming a Christian did not make her less of a successful business woman. Now she had Christ as her Senior Partner and with Him we can imagine that trade remained good and that much of her profit was used to assist His servants in the work of the Gospel.

As a Hospitable Woman

Lydia's transformation of life was evidenced by her eagerness to give missionaries the hospitality of her fine home. Truth in her heart was manifested in kindness to each other--as they ought to be! "Be ye kind one to another." First came Lydia's faith, then the winning of her servants to Christ, then her love in gracious hospitality, and finally her reception of Paul and Silas into her home after their discharge from prison, bruised and battered though they were. She was not ashamed of the Lord's prisoners (see 1 Timothy 5:10; Hebrews 13:2 ; 1 Peter 4:9). While benefiting from Lydia's generous hospitality Paul warned all present of the terrible trials before them, and then parting from godly Lydia, praised God for all she had meant to him and his companions.

As a Consecrated Woman

Lydia always had "open house" for the saints of God and her home became a center of Christian fellowship in Philippi with perhaps the first Christian church being formed therein. When Paul came to write his letter to the Philippians, we can rest assured that Lydia was included in all the saints at Philippi to whom he sent his salutations (Philippians 1:1-7); and was also in his mind as one of those women who labored with him in the Gospel (Philippians 4:3). William Ramsay thinks that Lydia may have been either Euodia or Syntyche (Philippians 4:2). When Paul penned the triple exhortation--"Not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord" (Romans 12:11), we do not know whether he had his hospitable convert, Lydia, in mind. She certainly exemplified these three virtues, and grace can be ours to emulate them.

"Not slothful in business"

If our business is honorable and we are diligent in it, and if we are the Lord's, we have the assurance that if we honor Him in all transactions, He will honor us. He places no premium upon idleness or indolence. Did not Paul say that if we are not willing to work we have no right to eat? "Fervent in spirit" Moffatt's translation is suggestive here. He expresses it, "Maintain the spiritual glow," which, by God's grace Lydia was able to do as she cared for her business interests and pursuits which were no bar to her spirituality. Too often, we allow the secular to rob us of our glow. Our affection becomes too set on things below.

"Serving the Lord"

Lydia not only sold her dyes--she served her Saviour. She stayed in business that she might have the money to help God's servants in their ministry. How her generous care of Paul and Silas, and of many others, must have cheered their hearts. Lydia was, first of all, a consecrated Christian, then a conscientious business woman who continued to sell her purple dyes for the glory of God. When we reach heaven, we shall find this "seller of purple" wearing more superior garments, robes not stained even with the notable dye of Thyatira, but "washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb."