

Lydia, the Generous Hostess

Devotional Reading: James 2:14–26
Background Scripture: Acts 16:11–40

Acts 16:11–15, 40

¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. ¹² From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in

purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. ¹⁵ When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

⁴⁰ After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.



Key Text

When [Lydia] and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us. —Acts 16:15

The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses

Unit 3: Faithful Witnesses Spread the Good News

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the circumstances that God used to bring the good news of Jesus to Lydia's household.
2. Explain why acts of hospitality were vital for Christians of the first century.
3. Make a plan to practice hospitality as a characteristic of his or her own faithful witness.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. I Was a Stranger
- B. Lesson Context

I. Encouraging Encounters (Acts 16:11–15)

- A. Traveling from Troas (vv. 11–12)
- B. Encountering Lydia (vv. 13–14)
- C. Believing and Baptizing (v. 15)

Breaking Barriers with Hospitality

II. Heartfelt Hospitality (Acts 16:40)

- A. Out of Prison (v. 40a)
- B. Place of Refuge (v. 40b)

A Stranger's Kindness

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- A. Practicing Hospitality
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. I Was a Stranger

After college, I accepted an internship on the other side of the country. For the first time, I was far away from family, friends, and everything familiar. The roads were confusing, the air smelled different, and the local accents took some time to decode. I loved my internship but often felt alone in this unfamiliar place.

I tried to find new friends at church, but the hospitality felt quite cold. While some people greeted me at the door with smiles and goodie bags, no one tried to learn my name or where I was from. Even after attending services for a few weeks, no one seemed to recognize me.

However, an older couple from work showed me generous hospitality that changed everything. They took time to listen to me, invited me into their home for meals, and even took me to the doctor's office when I was sick. When I felt unsafe in my housing situation, they offered me a place to stay. Their kindness and generosity made all the difference. I was a stranger, but they showed me hospitality (compare Hebrews 13:2).

The Bible teaches us to show hospitality to others (Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9; 3 John 8; etc.). Jesus himself teaches that when believers extend hospitality to "the least of these brothers and sisters of mine," it is regarded as being done unto the Lord himself (Matthew 25:34–40). Today's study provides a first-century example of hospitality toward a stranger. Through this example, we will see how Christian love is embodied.

B. Lesson Context

Beginning in Acts 13:1, the book of Acts focuses on the missionary travels of the apostle Paul. The church in Antioch commissioned Paul and Barnabas to carry the gospel beyond that Syrian city to the regions of Cyprus (a large island), Pisidia, Pamphylia, and Galatia. We often refer to this as Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:1–14:28).

On the next missionary journey (Acts 15:36–18:22), Paul and Silas visited the previous locations but also pushed farther west toward Roman Asia. This expedition was almost blown apart at

the outset when Paul and Barnabas had a tense disagreement over the advisability of taking along John Mark, a relative of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10). Therefore, they divided into two teams: Barnabas and John Mark returned to the island of Cyprus (Acts 15:39), the home territory of Barnabas (4:36), while Paul recruited Silas, a respected church leader (15:22), to accompany him (15:40–41).

Paul then traveled to Lystra, where he met with Timothy and invited him to join the missionary journey (Acts 16:1–5). Paul and his companions then traveled through the regions of Phrygia and Galatia. They reached the port city of Troas, located at the northern end of the Aegean Sea, where Paul received a vision of an unknown man from Macedonia who invited the apostle to come to that region (16:8–10). It is at this point in Paul's second missionary journey that we arrive at today's lesson. The year is around AD 50, and it has been some 15 years since Paul's encounter with the resurrected Christ (see lesson 11).

I. Encouraging Encounters

(Acts 16:11–15)

A. Travels from Troas (vv. 11–12)

11. From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis.

Having received the vision of a man from Macedonia in the verse just before this one, Paul sets out *from Troas* across the Aegean Sea with Silas and Timothy (see Lesson Context). The first-person plural pronoun *we* suggests that Luke, the author of the book of Acts, accompanies them.

Samothrace is a small island-city off the eastern coast of Macedonia. It is about 50 miles northwest of Troas. The prevailing winds in the northern part of the Aegean Sea are from the northeast, so the ship makes good time to *Neapolis*, about 70 miles from Samothrace. Neapolis serves as the port city for Philippi, which is about 10 miles inland (contrast the five days a journey in the opposite direction takes in Acts 20:6).

12. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that dis-

trict of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

Philippi is a city with a rich history. Named after Philip II, the city came under Roman control in 168 BC. Philippi is located on a major Roman highway, resulting in significant trade traffic across the region. Therefore, it is an important Roman commercial and administrative center in the heart of the Greco-Roman world. Philippi is populated with retired Roman soldiers and not many Jews.

The ministry of Paul and his companions lasts a period of *several days*, which may mean a stretch as short as a week.

What Do You Think?

How can you help your church enhance ministry to believers whose occupations require travel?

Digging Deeper

In what ways can you partner with congregations in other towns to achieve this goal?

B. Encountering Lydia (vv. 13–14)

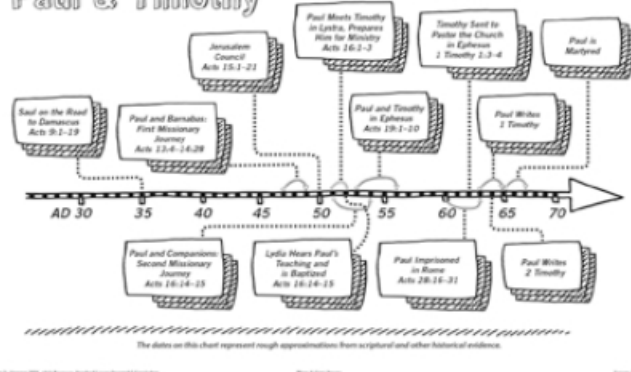
13. On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.

Paul's usual pattern is first to go to the local synagogue when beginning a ministry in a new city (see Acts 13:14; 14:1; 18:4). In Philippi, however, the procedure is different. Given Philippi's history as a Roman colony, it is possible that not enough Jews live there to call for a synagogue. By Jewish tradition, it takes at least 10 Jewish men to constitute a proper synagogue.

First-century Jewish religious practices seem to necessitate running water for ritual cleansing practices. Therefore, if no synagogue was present in Philippi, then a location by *the river* would be ideal for Jews to gather for *prayer* and worship. The *river* in question may be the Gangites River, about a mile from town.

In first-century Macedonia, *women* experience more independence than they do in other ancient Greco-Roman contexts. In Philippi, in particular,

Chronology of Relationship: Paul & Timothy



Visual for Lessons 11 & 13. Display this visual as you review the ministries of Paul and Timothy in the first-century church.

women held leadership roles in various places for pagan and cultic worship, especially in the temple of Artemis located there.

Most women in this era were expected to follow the religious practices of their husbands. Roman men, however, often complained of the influence of foreign (non-Greco-Roman) religions on their wives. Historians of the period report that a significant number of Gentile women converted to Judaism or were drawn to worship alongside Jewish women. Therefore, it is not surprising that Paul would interact with both Jewish and Gentile women. Furthermore, women played significant roles in the growth of the first-century church (examples: Acts 18:2; Philippians 4:3). At this riverside, Paul meets a woman who would become a key member of the forthcoming church in Philippi.

14a. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth.

The name *Lydia* is notable because it is also the name of a district in the Roman province of Asia Minor. Some commentators suggest that this *woman* may have been formerly enslaved, as it was common for enslaved individuals to be named after their homeland.

Lydia's hometown, *Thyatira*, is the capital of the district of Lydia and is located on the other side of the Aegean Sea, about 100 miles southeast of Troas (compare Revelation 2:18–29). The city is

known for producing dyed textiles, with purple being especially prominent. The process of creating purple dye in the first century was unpleasant and often smelly, as it involved extraction from the murex snail. Consequently, *purple cloth* was typically the most expensive textile, reserved for the wealthy and often worn by royalty. As a *dealer* or trader of this dye, Lydia is likely a woman of significant financial means.

14b. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

The description of Lydia as *a worshiper of God* has three possible interpretations: (1) she is Jewish, (2) she is a convert to Judaism, or (3) she is a God-fearing Gentile, similar to Cornelius (see Acts 10:2). The third option is the most likely. The Greek word translated *worshiper* is the same term used to refer to the Gentile converts who follow God (Acts 13:43; 17:17).

Despite her independence and wealth, Lydia's *heart* is ready for the message of Christ. After hearing *Paul's message*, she does not spend the upcoming week reflecting on the message. Instead, as Paul speaks the word of God, her heart is *opened* by the *Lord*, perhaps indicating that he removes any misconceptions that may prevent her from accepting a crucified Messiah. This event echoes the events described in the conclusion of Luke's Gospel. During a post-resurrection appearance to his disciples, Jesus "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45).

What Do You Think?

Have you ever had a moment when you felt God opening your heart to something new? How did you respond?

Digging Deeper

What steps can you take to be better attentive to the Spirit's leading?

C. Believing and Baptizing (v. 15)

15a. When she and the members of her household were baptized,

Lydia's decision of faith is followed by her baptism. The text gives the impression that this happens quickly, possibly on the same day.

Throughout the book of Acts, faith and baptism are often mentioned together. For example, the Samaritans who listened to Philip's preaching believed and were baptized (Acts 8:12). The Ethiopian eunuch, after hearing Phillip's proclamation of the gospel, immediately expressed his desire to be baptized (8:35–38). Likewise, the Philippian jailer and his family were baptized (16:31–33). The Corinthians who listened to Paul's preaching also believed and were baptized (18:8). Lydia's conversion follows the same pattern.

This is the first mention in the book of Acts of a *household* receiving baptism. The second instance occurs shortly thereafter (Acts 16:33; see also 1 Corinthians 1:16). The text does not provide details about the composition of Lydia's household. Since her household follows her lead in baptism, she may be a widow, thereby the head of the household with authority over those in it.

15b. she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.

Lydia is no longer merely a “worshiper of God” (Acts 16:14, above). She experiences a shift in identity that leads her to be *a believer in the Lord*. This change leads her to make a proposal that must not be overlooked. The book of Acts often describes the heart of the person after baptism. In the case of the Ethiopian, he left rejoicing (Acts 8:39). The Philippian jailer is filled with joy but also brings the missionaries into his house and prepares a meal for them (16:34). In this case, part of Lydia's response after her baptism is her insistence that Paul and his companions come lodge at her *house*—a response full of generosity and hospitality.

Such an invitation may be a dangerous arrangement for Lydia. There is potential resistance from her surrounding community that may be opposed to the gospel—like the mob in Ephesus (Acts 19:28). Lydia can invite the missionaries to stay in her home. But she cannot guarantee what the reaction of the neighbors will be. Her invitation, more than just an inconvenience to her busy schedule, is an act of courage.

Additionally, accepting her invitation would be courageous for Paul and his companions. Although Lydia had been worshiping and pray-

ing with Jews in Philippi, she is likely not Jewish. Consequently, it is unlikely that her household adheres to Jewish purity laws. Paul's acceptance of her invitation to hospitality implies that he, a Jew, agrees to stay in the home of a Gentile. Such an occurrence is not new by this point in the first-century church (compare Acts 10:9–48). Even so, the decision to stay in the house of a Gentile would have caught the attention of any other Jews in Macedonia.

Acts of hospitality played a vital role in ancient cultures, especially in Jewish culture. These acts included welcoming and caring for travelers, out-of-town visitors, and even strangers, as Genesis 18:1–8 demonstrates. In a time without hotel chains as we know them, the offering of generous hospitality provided a safe place for an individual to rest, have a meal, and care for their animals if they had any. In some areas of the ancient world that are characterized by harsh climates and limited access to water, providing hospitality could mean the difference between life and death for a traveler.

What Do You Think?

How can you be more intentional about welcoming and serving others, both in your church and in your neighborhood?

Digging Deeper

What barriers prevent you from doing so, and how will you address these issues?

Breaking Barriers with Hospitality

I sat in the sweltering heat and humidity of Colombo, the largest city in Sri Lanka. From my observations, a social hierarchy among its residents was evident. Certain areas of the city seemed affluent, while others appeared dilapidated and deprived of wealth. On this particular afternoon, I had the privilege of meeting a local church and governmental leader for lunch.

Halfway through the meal, there was a knock on the door. My new friend excused himself, walked to the front door, and opened it without hesitation. Within seconds, seven men in orange jumpsuits surrounded him. These men were

responsible for cleaning the city streets and were regarded as part of the lowest social class. With a warm smile, the leader greeted each man by name and invited them into the house. I later learned that this was a common occurrence; in fact, as many as 25 of these men shared a Christmas meal in that house.

His habits of hospitality moved me. He served people whom society had deemed “less than.” In doing so, he demonstrated the radical nature of Christian hospitality—one that transcends social boundaries (see Luke 14:12–14).

Lydia’s display of hospitality to Paul was equally radical. Would she lose influence in her community by inviting Jewish men to stay in her home? What would it look like for you to show radical hospitality to those groups that your community has deemed “less than”? —N. V.

III. Heartfelt Hospitality

(Acts 16:40)

A. Out of Prison (v. 40a)

40a. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison,

A dangerous situation resulted in Paul and Silas facing time in *prison*. While still in Philippi, Paul encountered an enslaved woman who possessed a spirit of fortune-telling. She followed Paul and his companions around town, proclaiming their movements and intentions (Acts 16:16–17). Annoyed by her presence and actions, Paul eventually cast out the spirit from her (16:18). This act angered her owners, who were upset about the loss of income caused by the removal of the spirit. They mobilize the townspeople and the authorities against Paul and Silas (16:19–20). Consequently, the two were beaten and thrown into jail (16:22–24).

That night, Paul and his companions experience a miraculous release when an earthquake breaks their chains (Acts 16:26). Rather than retaliate against the jailer, they convert him and his household to faith in Christ (16:28–32). The following morning, after Paul proclaims his Roman citizenship, the authorities escort him and his companions from the prison and request that they leave Philippi (16:35–39).

B. Place of Refuge (v. 40b)

40b. they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.

The shift in narrative from first-person “us” (Acts 16:15b, above) to the third-person *they* indicates that Luke is likely no longer with Paul at this point in the journey.

Before departing from Philippi, Paul and Silas feel compelled to stop again at *Lydia’s house* to rest and recover after being released from prison. Their upcoming travels will lead them to Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth (Acts 17–18). Thus the gospel will spread despite (or because of) persecution.

Once again, Lydia’s hospitality takes center stage. This stop also gives Paul and Silas a chance to see and comfort *the brothers and sisters* of Christ-followers. For these meetings to occur, a suitable location is needed, and Lydia’s home serves this purpose. Lydia’s house is not only open to the missionaries but also welcomes other members of the first-century church in Philippi, suggesting that her home is quite spacious by the standards of that era. Later, perhaps Paul’s letter to the Philippians would be read aloud in her house. Despite the

How to Say It

Aegean	A-jee-un.
Amphipolis	Am- <i>flip</i> -o-liss.
Antioch	An-tee-ock.
Ephesus	Ef-uh-sus.
Galatia	Guh- <i>lay</i> -shuh.
Lydia	Lid-ee-uh.
Lystra	Liss-truh.
Macedonia	Mass-eh- <i>doe</i> -nee-uh.
Neapolis	Nee- <i>ap</i> -o-lis.
Pamphylia	Pam- <i>fill</i> -ee-uh.
Philippi	Fih- <i>lip</i> -pie or Fil-ih-pie.
Phrygia	Frij-e-uh.
Syrian	Sear-ee-un.
Thessalonica	Thess-uh-lo- <i>nye</i> -kuh (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
Thyatira	Thy-uh- <i>tie</i> -ruh (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
Troas	Tro-az.

potential risk from pagan neighbors, Lydia shows hospitality to those who travel to preach the gospel of Christ.

What Do You Think?

Who in your life encouraged you in your faith after you faced a trial? What actions did they take?

Digging Deeper

How can you be that person for someone else?

A Stranger’s Kindness

Growing up in South Africa, my family enjoyed many outdoor adventures. One memorable experience came when my father took my brothers and me on a hike along the rocks and cliffs near Kini Bay, a small beach near the city of Gqeberha.

We set off barefoot and without mobile phones, expecting a scenic five-kilometer loop—approximately three miles of hiking. As the sun began to set and evening approached, rain showers appeared, and my brothers and I started to wonder whether our father really did know the way home. “It’s just beyond that corner!” he would say. However, each time we looked ahead, we realized another stretch of cliffs lay before us.

With sore feet and tired legs, we finally reached a small village well after dark. We knocked on several doors, hoping someone would answer and allow us to borrow their phone to call our mother. Most doors remained closed, and one even slammed in our faces. Eventually, a kind lady took pity on a father and his three young, rain-drenched, shoeless children on her doorstep. She welcomed us into her home and helped us call for help.

There’s something about showing hospitality that reminds me that we are all made in God’s image and that we are all sometimes in need of compassion. The Lord has welcomed us into his home and calls us to practice hospitality with others—even strangers. How will you show hospitality to strangers in the upcoming week? You never know who you might be serving (see Hebrews 13:2).
—N. V.

Conclusion

A. Practicing Hospitality

Acts of hospitality serve as a faithful witness to the life-changing effect of the gospel. Hospitality is essentially “love in action.” When we show hospitality, we demonstrate our love for God and others.

Lydia exemplified this by providing a welcoming space for people to gather, share meals, engage in fellowship and prayer, and encounter Christ. Imagine Paul’s experience in Philippi without Lydia’s hospitality; he would have lacked a base for his ministry and somewhere to return to after being released from prison.

In today’s world, hospitality doesn’t have to mean opening your home to missionaries, though that is one way to express it. It can involve sharing a meal with new members of your church community, providing space for prayer and fellowship, or simply being attentive to the needs of your neighbors.

Hospitality should never be used as an opportunity to show off; rather, it should be an expression of love that comes from experiencing the ultimate expression of love: salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Lydia encountered this transforming love and, in turn, used her hospitality to change the lives of others. How will you use your hospitality to make a difference in the lives of those around you?

What Do You Think?

How has this lesson changed your perspective on hospitality?

Digging Deeper

How is hospitality an act of serving Christ himself (see Matthew 25:34–40)?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for Lydia’s example of faithfulness and hospitality. We ask that your Spirit transform our hearts so that we may be hospitable people. Strengthen us to be willing to open our hearts and homes to welcome others, even strangers. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God grows the church through our hospitality.