

## CONVERSION – LYDIA AND THE JAILER

### Introduction

Conversion to Christ is emphasised in the New Testament. It takes people out of darkness into God's marvellous light. It saves from sin and death. It leads to adoption into the family of God and eternal life. Without it no one can enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3).

The same factors are in play whenever people convert to Christ but they are experienced in different ways. That is obvious in the cases of two early converts in Philippi – Lydia and the jailer. It is helpful to consider their backgrounds, the conversion itself, and what resulted from it.

### The backgrounds

The first convert mentioned is Lydia. She was a business woman who traded in expensive material – purple cloth or dye such as was used by people in the service of the Roman Empire. She appears to have been visiting since the writer describes her as coming from Thyatira, but she had a home in the city of Philippi.

She was a worshipper of God. That showed she had a regard for God. It was the place and time of prayer, suggesting she had some faith in God and sought his blessing. It is noteworthy that she met with other worshippers – there was a sense of belonging. It also implies she had some knowledge of the scriptures. In that regard she resembles Cornelius, and like him, something was missing in spite of all the goodness that was visible.

There are many people like her – their religion is good as far as it goes but there is something missing that only Christ in the gospel can provide.

The jailer was different. There is no mention of any interest in God or any knowledge of him. He was accustomed to cruelty, and putting Paul and Silas in the stocks is evidence of that. He only showed interest in the things of God when his life was in danger.

Many people are like him – living ordinary lives without any taste for the things of God. It takes something drastic to make them take God seriously.

One thing in common is that God sent messengers to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to them. That is what changed them. In both cases we see the hand of God at work – in the earthquake, and in opening Lydia's heart – but it was the knowledge of Christ that made the difference, not an experience. There is such a thing as Christian experience, including the change God makes in a person's heart and life, but that comes with the gospel.

### The conversions

Lydia and her fellow worshippers heard Paul give the message of Jesus.

The message includes the Person. He is God our Saviour come into the world in human flesh – 'God and man in two distinct natures and one person forever.' As the Son of God he was the Father's servant; his obedience led to our salvation. In his life and ministry he revealed God, and his miracles of mercy were pointers to what God would do through him. He was betrayed, crucified and buried. On the third day he rose to life again, and then returned to heaven to be rewarded with all authority and power in order to give people eternal life.

Why did these things happen? God was speaking by him. And God was laying sin on him, so that his (voluntary) death was a judicial act – the penalty of sin. By bearing our sins he opened the door to

our being forgiven. His resurrection was evidence that sin's penalty had been paid. It is evidence of eternal life through him.

Now, from heaven's throne, he gives the Spirit to sinners to turn them from darkness to light when they hear this message. The Spirit restores spiritual life, and the Spirit will restore physical life at the resurrection.

So – the message of Christ is also a call to us to repent – to turn to God with confession of sin and trust in Christ to save us from it and give us life eternal.

It is the same message every time, but sometimes it takes effect while on other occasions it does not. The writer says, 'The Lord opened Lydia's heart so that she attended to the things that Paul spoke.'

She knew – but she did not know – until the Spirit of God worked in her heart. Scripture teaches that at heart we are opposed to God. We do not grasp what he is telling us, and we avoid him. Even religious people are guilty of this - Jesus saw it in the Pharisees of his day; Paul complained he still had the remains of that hostility and it was in conflict with the new heart God had given him (Romans 7:18-20). The great promise of the Old Testament was that when Christ would come God would give people a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26-27). According to John the Baptist that is exactly what Jesus would do (Luke 3:115-17).

That is a new attitude towards God and Christ. It is a new understanding; it is also willingness to receive Christ and to serve God. It is love taking the place of opposition. This is why Jesus told Nicodemus, 'You must be born again'. And so must we.

The jailer only showed interest when two great events coincided. An earthquake shook the prison so that the doors opened and the prisoners were free to escape. In those days that would have cost him his life. He would have committed suicide if Paul had not stopped him. The other event was the obvious presence of God. The actions of Paul and Silas in prison showed they were men of God. The earthquake and the fact the prisoners stayed showed that God was present.

In the trauma of the moment the jailer felt lost, and went to the men of God asking, 'What must I do to be saved?' Sometimes God uses a traumatic event to make us realise he is there and we have to deal with him. Some people resist his grace; others seek his face.

In answer to his question Paul presented the jailer with the gospel transaction – for faith in Christ involves a transaction with heaven. There are: the gospel facts; the gospel call (or offer); and the gospel promise.

Paul must have told the jailer the facts about Jesus – that was the message he gave everywhere. He died for our sins and rose again to show those sins were put away. God took him to heaven, giving all power in heaven and earth. He is therefore able to forgive the worst of sinners and give them the Holy Spirit and eternal life.

The gospel is also God presenting the terms on which he will save a sinner. 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.' All God asks us to do is accept the fact that Jesus has died in our place and lives to save us. Some people believe the fact but refuse to welcome it; believing includes putting our trust in Jesus – who he is, what he has done, and what he has promised. It is investing all our hope in him alone.

The gospel is also God's promise. If you believe in Jesus 'you shall be saved'.

The jailer rejoiced. He believed; he trusted; he felt secure for time and eternity; he knew God was keeping his promise.

### **The results**

The results were similar in both cases. They were baptised. They involved their household. They showed kindness to Christ's followers.

Both Lydia and the jailer were baptised. They had never been baptised in the name of Jesus before so it was appropriate to do so. Since baptism is a visible confirmation of God's grace to sinners through Christ it is obvious they were accepting that grace for themselves – the response of faith to the testimony of God.

In both cases they took the lead in involving their household in their new-found faith in Christ. The head of the household has a responsibility for their welfare and conduct; so he/she is responsible for the worship of God in their home ('the church in your house' – Philemon 1:2), and their obedience to the faith. No one can produce faith in another person, but we may have a responsibility to encourage it.

In both cases they showed kindness to Christ's followers. Lydia persuaded Paul and Silas to accept hospitality – they stayed at her home for some time. The jailer provided them with food after he had tended to their wounds. Such kindness is of the essence of Christianity.

Jesus' last command to his disciples was 'Love one another as I have loved you'. The Epistle of James points out the absurdity of professing faith in Christ while discriminating against the poor. John, in his first epistle, writes 'let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth'. When describing the Day of Judgement Jesus mentions, 'Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:40). Hospitality is commended in the epistles as a desirable quality especially in those who hold office in the church (Romans 12:13; Titus 1:6-9; 3 John).

These are some of the things that 'accompany salvation' (Hebrews 6:9). Neither Lydia nor the jailer needed to be taught it – they showed kindness of their own accord. It is tragic when people who have professed Christ for years show less kindness to their brothers and sisters in Christ than those new-born believers did. Some churches hardly deserve the name of church because the people are not even interested in getting to know one another let alone show brotherly kindness. Beware of that!

### **Conclusion**

This should make us reflect on our own experience and outlook.

Some people find themselves uncertain of where they stand with God. They look for Christian characteristics in themselves and try to reform when they do not find them. Others assume that a religious life is all that matters.

The key question is 'What do you think of Christ?' Do you see that you need him to put you right with God? And do you believe that God has given him to you (as part of humanity) to save you from sin and make you a child of God? Do you welcome his crucifixion, his resurrection, and his glorious saving power? Is he your only hope?

If the answer to those questions is 'Yes', the next question is 'Do you love him and are you trying to please him?' The way you live will not affect your salvation but it can affect your confidence that you

are a new creation in Christ. And that lack of confidence leads to many errors. It is easy to make the mistake of putting our own comfort or confidence before everything else – the main thing is to love God and Christ. Obey him – for his sake. Show kindness – for his sake. Join in worship – for his sake. Only the sincerity of our love will provide confirmation that we are his.

If you see no need of Christ, then you are still a stranger to God and still responsible to him for all you do. You have no forgiveness and no eternal life. Heed the message about Jesus Christ, welcome it, and if you can't welcome it, then ask God to open your heart. 'Remember me, Lord, with the love you have for your own people' (Psalm 106:4).