



*Lydia*, Silvia Dimitrova

# Lydia Encounters Jesus in Worship

## SCRIPTURE

Acts 16:11–15

## MAIN IDEA

Baptism connects us to God and the community of faith.

## OPENING PRAYER

God, grant me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it, trusting that you will make all things right, if I surrender to your will, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with you forever in the next. Amen.

*Reinhold Niebuhr, 1892–1971*

## INTRODUCTION

Lydia

Who is this woman? Slender in purple,  
approaching the river, Head demure,  
hands across, heart secure.  
Who are these women?  
Accompanying her, tumbling, cascading,  
following her gaze,  
Slightly perplexed, subtly amazed.  
Who is this man? Bearded, intriguing,  
Joining the women, gorgeous in vesture,  
gently announcing, greeting in gesture.  
By the river of Philippi, they sat down and met  
and sang the songs of Zion,  
Outside the gate of the Greek city, Roman colony.  
Lydia, with friends and household, dealer in  
purple, in business astute.  
From Thyatira in Asia Minor, Gentile  
worshipping God of the Jews.  
Paul, with friends Silas and Luke, following  
a vision of Asia Minor.  
Meets a woman of Macedonia, the Good News  
comes to Europa.  
With hearts open to the cross of Christ, they  
pass through the river of baptism.  
To enter the joy of the Kingdom, like trees  
planted by the waterside, they bring forth  
their fruit in due season.<sup>29</sup>

*Graham Kings*

<sup>29</sup> "Lydia" from *Nourishing Connections* is © Graham Kings, 2020. Published by Canterbury Press. Used by permission. rights@hymnsam.co.uk.

**Acts 16:11–15**

<sup>11</sup> We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, <sup>12</sup> and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. <sup>13</sup> On the sabbath day

we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup> A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a

dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. <sup>15</sup> When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

*Contemplate*

Consider the art chosen to illustrate this lesson. How is Lydia depicted? How does the way she is depicted communicate who she is?

How can art that depicts a Bible story support the written text?

In what ways can art impact your faith?

Lydia of Thyatira has been a muse for Biblical scholars, poets, and artists for centuries. The poem, "Lydia," at the beginning of this lesson, was written in 2016 by the Rt. Rev. Dr. Graham Kings of the Church of England. In the poem he retells Lydia's story in an accessible way that may appeal to people living in our time and place. Another way to enter the story is through a famous painting of Lydia of Thyatira by Harold Copping in 1927, during the pre-industrial era. In the painting Lydia sits with a small group of people as she listens intently to Paul's preaching. The beautiful Gangites River in Greece forms the backdrop for this scene. In addition to the poems and paintings created to communicate the significance of Lydia's story, she has been elevated to sainthood in the



*Lydia of Thyatira, Harold Copping*

Roman Catholic tradition, and the Episcopal and Eastern Orthodox Churches honor her with special days; Lydia is celebrated every year.

Paul's second missionary journey described in Acts 16: 6–13 sets the stage for Lydia's sacred encounter. Paul and his companions had a traveling itinerary for their trip, but Paul was prompted by a dream to change course and go to Macedonia. Luke recalls that Paul had a vision during the night in which a person of Macedonia stood pleading "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). Convinced that God had called Paul

and his companions to proclaim the good news to the Macedonians, they immediately crossed over the Aegean Sea to Europe and arrived in Neapolis, a port on the Macedonian coast. From there Paul preached the gospel in three cities in the province of Macedonia: Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroea. During his time in Philippi, Paul encountered Lydia and she became a follower of Christ.

## EXAMINE THE CHARACTERS

Stories in Luke-Acts have a fairly typical structure and include a plot, characters, and dialogue. Lydia's story, while simple, is nonetheless incredibly significant. Lydia, her household, a group of women, Silas and Timothy, and Paul and Luke were all gathered for prayer (Luke's presence is indicated in his use of the pronoun "we" in verse 11). It was the Sabbath and, as was customary, Paul and his companions were looking for a place to worship. They went out of the gates along the river and joined a small group of worshippers. As the story develops, Lydia emerges as the main character. Luke includes Lydia's name, her location, and her financial status, breaking from the socio-cultural framework of his time and place that allowed women to be present but not seen, heard, or known. Lydia had moved from Thyatira to Philippi, and she was a wealthy merchant of purple dyes.

In today's culture, the use of synthetic dyes for fabric has become a mainstay, making the global synthetic dye market worth an estimated \$31.97 billion in 2019 and expected to reach \$50.38 billion in 2023. In Lydia's time, making fabric dye also was a lucrative business but dyes were made from natural ingredients.<sup>30</sup>

Purple dyed fabric was a luxury item—costly and reserved for the elite and imperial class as a status

symbol. The dye was highly priced because of the intricate process used to produce it. The mucus of the hypobranchial gland of the Murex shellfish had to be extracted and placed into a brine solution with vinegar. The solution was left in the sun until its color gradually transformed from a yellowish hue to a deep purplish red. In the final step, the solution was boiled down and further concentrated. Mucus from approximately 12,000 shellfish was needed to make one gram of pure dye. At the time, this single gram (about the weight of a metal paperclip) of purple dye was more highly valued than ten grams of gold. The value of a pound of wool dyed with purple dye was worth as much as three years of a laborer's wage.

## SACRED ENCOUNTER

Lydia's sacred encounter may appear uneventful or even dull compared to other encounters in Luke-Acts. She was worshipping on the Sabbath with a group of women at the Gargites River in Philippi. With her were the people of her household, and maybe her children and a few other relatives. Lydia's sacred encounter took place while Paul was preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Acts, Paul is primarily an itinerant missionary preacher, and people are converted to the way of Jesus Christ everywhere he travels. Lydia listened intently to Paul's words and the Lord opened her heart to accept the things he said (Lk 16:14b). Lydia and the members of her household responded to the gospel by being baptized. Her baptism into the way of Jesus Christ impelled her to join in Christ's mission and she offered her home as a safe house to missionaries. Through her generosity, early church missionaries had a connection through a believer in Philippi, the gateway to the rest of Macedonia.

Lydia's sacred encounter had two parts: she heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and she was baptized. Baptism was a practice of the early church and

<sup>30</sup> "Synthetic Dyes Market worth \$8.7 billion by 2027," MarketsandMarkets Research Pvt. Ltd., Globe Newswire, September 05, 2022; [globenewswire.com/en/news-release/2022/09/05/2509636/0/en/Synthetic-Dyes-Market-worth-8-7-billion-by-2027-Exclusive-Report-by-MarketsandMarkets.html](https://www.globenewswire.com/en/news-release/2022/09/05/2509636/0/en/Synthetic-Dyes-Market-worth-8-7-billion-by-2027-Exclusive-Report-by-MarketsandMarkets.html).

viewed as both a human act and an act in which God was at work.<sup>31</sup> What Lydia heard transformed her and led to her baptism. Changed, she also encouraged the people closest to her—the women who worked for her in her purple dye business, household servants, and relatives—to be baptized (Acts 16:13–15).

In the New Testament we are introduced to the subject of baptism through John the Baptizer. In Luke 3:3–6, John was baptizing people of the Judean countryside and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins<sup>32</sup> when Jesus came from Nazareth and also was baptized by John. Baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins is a core practice of Christian faith and is one of only two sacraments in the Reformed tradition. Lydia's example of baptism and acceptance of a new way of life points us to a central element of following Christ.

## TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

Lydia's story includes important details. Luke tells us that Lydia is independent and an entrepreneur. He takes special care to mention that Lydia is a person who has achieved a status in her society that puts her on par with a male householder. Which details point to this status? Luke carefully includes that Lydia is known for the products she sells and that she is known as the head of a household. Although it was unusual for first-century women to be householders on their own, it is not without precedent. Lydia belonged to a category of women in the early church who had achieved a high financial status in society but were still marginalized for their gender. The early church provided an opportunity for Lydia and women like her to become active participants in a new emerging society. Lydia could use her wealth and her status to expand the reign of God—and she did.

<sup>31</sup> Gregg R. Allison, "The Ordinances of the Church," The Gospel Coalition, accessed March 31, 2023; [thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-ordinances-of-the-church](http://thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-ordinances-of-the-church).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

## Contemplate

The Reformed faith tradition recognizes both infant baptism and believers baptism. Parents may decide when to have their children baptized. Will they choose to baptize before the children are old enough to make the decision, secure in the belief that their family and faith community promises to raise their child in the ways of Jesus Christ? Or will they wait for baptism until their children are old enough to understand what faith in Jesus Christ means and make the decision for themselves? How have decisions about baptism been made in your family and faith community? How was the decision made for you?

How is the act of Baptism a sacred encounter in the church today?

Lydia is described as a "worshipper of God" (Lk 16:14). This probably means that she was familiar with, and sympathetic to, Jewish religious practice. Her transformation from "a bystander God-fearer" to an "active Christ follower" demonstrates the power of the preached word. When "the Lord opened her heart" to receive Paul's preaching, Lydia responded eagerly by seeking baptism. She generously offered her house to the Pauline missionaries as a home base and became the first person recorded in Scripture to support Paul with hospitality. Through Paul's letters we learn that women were an integral part of the early church and that they were co-workers on his missions; many of them owned the houses in which the early Christians met. These homes were the birthplaces of many new worshipping

communities, ensuring the continuation of the gospel. Through her faith, leadership, and resources, Lydia—and other women like her—helped Christianity grow and thrive.

## CLOSING PRAYER

God, our Father, we are exceedingly frail and indisposed to every virtuous and gallant undertaking. Strengthen our weakness, we beseech you that we may do valiantly in this spiritual war; help us against our own negligence and cowardice and defend us from the treachery of our unfaithful hearts. For the sake of Jesus Christ, Amen.

*Thomas á Kempis, 1380–1471*

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See page 25 for additional information.

## Lydia Encounters Jesus in Worship

**Overview:** This lesson's sacred encounter amazes us with the ways Jesus' love takes up residence in Lydia's heart and inspires her to dedicate her family, time, business, home, and leadership talents to further God's Kingdom. Lydia's story demonstrates that prayer groups and Bible studies are spiritual disciplines that help us mature in the faith and care for each other.

**Materials:** Intercessory prayer notebooks; recording of the sound of water and a way to play it; artistic depictions of the story of Lydia (optional)

### Prayer

Play the recording of the sound of water to prepare the group for prayer.

Invite the group to imagine that they are beside a river and can sense running water and the cool air of a breeze that blows against their skin.

Acknowledge the presence of Jesus with three deep breaths.

Read: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18:20).

Lead the group in the opening prayer on page 69.

### Perform Acts 16:11–15

Today's reading lends itself to a monologue in which Luke, the author of Acts, reports how he met Lydia and witnessed her baptism. Additional group members could be part of a tableau of the scene. The participants may wear costumes for a dramatic monologue or simply read together as a group.

Continue to play the sound of running water from the opening prayer without interruption, as if participants are at the river for the baptism of Lydia.

### Introduce the Lesson

The person who reads the monologue or another volunteer can introduce the lesson by reading the poem that follows the scripture passage on page 69. Continue to play the sound of water through the reading.

### Contemplate

Ask everyone to look at the art that illustrates this lesson (and any additional art you found depicting Lydia) and discuss the questions in the *Contemplate* section on page 70.

Invite the group to take a moment of silence, with hearts that are open and receptive to what God may want to say, and contemplate the images.

Give participants time to write or draw their observations in their notebooks of intercessory prayers.

According to Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, each person has unique styles of learning based on their experiences, strengths, preferences, and interests. We strengthen our abilities by exposing ourselves to various learning styles and experiences. Looking at paintings, photos, or nature is related to visual-spatial intelligence (see Gardner's book *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* to learn more).

Ask the group: Who might we exclude when we use reading or verbal communication alone to transmit the message of the word of God in worship?

### Examine the Characters

Lydia was a business owner committed to the spiritual practice of praying in a group of women. Members of circles of prayer support each other, strengthen their relationships with God, and become more confident praying in public. The Ethiopian eunuch in lesson seven preferred to read the Scriptures on his own. When Philip helped the man understand what he was reading, Philip became something like the eunuch's personal spiritual director. Lydia and the Ethiopian man were people with many responsibilities, but they made time for their spiritual practices.

Ask the group: Who are the people in your life who prioritize their spiritual disciplines despite being busy? How does making spiritual practices a priority have an impact on their lives and work?

### Transformative Experience

Consider: In Acts 9:3–22 we read the dramatic story of the sacred encounter of Jesus with Paul (then called Saul) on the road to Damascus. In obedience to the voice of the Spirit, Paul is eventually led to Lydia. Lydia's sacred encounter with Paul moves her to dedicate her life, family, and home to support the missionary work that further spreads the gospel.

Ask the group: How can we encounter Jesus? What could God be calling us to do at this time? In what new ways can we share our testimonies with those who need to hear them? Are public prayer groups or home Bible studies valuable ways to create community, answer questions, and provide space for life transformation? Would you do something like this in your community or your home? What will you need to do it? What could hold you back?

### Closing Prayer

Play the sound of the running water again.

Invite the group to pray the closing prayer on page 73.

### Until the Next Lesson

Invite the group to add to their notebooks of intercessory prayers the names of evangelists; the names of people who host prayer groups or Bible studies in their homes, community, and online; and the names of people God is calling to share the gospel with others.

Pray for ministries that help the most disadvantaged people among us.