

Who was Lydia in the Bible?

Very little is said in the Bible about Lydia. There are only two mentions of her by name in Scripture—in Acts 16 we find the record of her conversion and her subsequent baptism (Acts 16:11-15). From the story of Lydia we can glean a few useful details about conversion, specifically about the conversion of Jewish believers.

Lydia in the Bible was originally from Thyatira but was living in Philippi when she met Paul on his second missionary journey. She was a seller of purple cloth, which Thyatira was famous for, being a center of indigo trade. Lydia apparently had moved to Philippi to ply her trade in that city. Archaeologists have found among the ruins of Thyatira inscriptions relating to a dyers' guild in the city. It is possible that Lydia was a member of this guild, but there is no evidence from the Bible to prove that detail.

Lydia was also a worshiper of God (Acts 16:14), and, when Paul found her, she was honoring the Sabbath, which means she was likely a Jew. The account of Lydia's conversion says that she was gathered with a group of other women on the Sabbath at a place of prayer near the river outside of Philippi. The fact that Paul, Timothy, Luke, and Silas came to the riverside to speak to the women most likely indicates there were not enough Jewish men in Philippi to open a synagogue there.

Lydia heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the Bible says that God opened her heart to pay attention to what Paul was saying (Acts 16:14). After she believed, Lydia was baptized, along with the rest of her household. Whether "her household" refers only her family, or if there were servants included in the number, is unclear from the biblical account. After Lydia's conversion and baptism, she insisted that Paul and his friends come to stay at her home, if they judged her to be "a believer in the Lord" (verse 15).

Luke says that “she prevailed upon us,” which indicates the fervency of her desire to be hospitable. The missionaries did indeed judge Lydia to be a true believer, and they stayed at her home while in Philippi.

Lydia’s conversion marks the start of a new epoch in the Bible. Up to that point, the gospel had not gone further west than Asia Minor. In fact, on this journey, Paul’s original intention had been to stay in Asia, but God had changed his plans. The Lord sent Paul a vision calling him westward across the Aegean Sea and into Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10). Lydia, although a native of Asia Minor, is the first person recorded to have been saved in Europe.

Later in biblical history, we discover there is a church in Thyatira (Revelation 2:18). Paul did not visit that city in any of his missionary journeys, and we have no record of who might have established that church. Could it be that Lydia is the one who brought the gospel to her hometown? It’s possible, but by no means certain. The Bible doesn’t say.

The story of Lydia in the Bible is a great example of God’s providence and His care for believers. Lydia was a worshiper of God but, like Cornelius in Acts 10, had not yet heard the gospel. God rerouted Paul and friends and also ensured that Lydia would be in the right place at the right time to encounter Paul and hear the good news of Jesus. And, as Lydia heard the gospel, God opened her heart so that she received the life-giving message. In this story, so full of divine intervention, we see the sovereignty of God in salvation; as Jesus said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them” (John 6:44). We also see the immediate bond that a new believer has with other believers in Christ—Lydia showed hospitality to those who brought the

good news, and she wouldn't take "no" for an answer.