

Philippi was a thoroughly Roman city. Though it was named after Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, it had become thoroughly Roman. For, when the Romans conquered Greece, Philippi was a major urban center with an important history.

It was at Philippi where the assassins of Julius Caesar and champions of the Republic, Marcus Junius Brutus and Gaius Cassius Longinus, more commonly known just as Brutus and Cassius, would go to war with Caesar's heir and greatest general on path to avenge Julius' murder, Marcus Antonius and Gaius Octavius (later to be known as Caesar Augustus). They clashed on the fields of Philippi **[image 1]** in the largest land battle Rome had ever engaged in 42BC, with over 36 legions of men (200,000) involved. Over 40,000 were killed on the Philippian plains, in what would become the deciding battle over whether Rome would continue as a Republic or would become an Empire. Octavius and Antony were victorious and eventually Octavius would become the first Emperor in a long line of Roman emperors, thus it was in Philippi that the 500-year-old Roman Republic was ended.

Philippi was then repatriated with Roman soldiers, whom the cash-strapped Augustus gave land in Philippi instead of military pay. It was given the status of a Roman colony **[image 2]** with its citizens granted the benefit of Roman citizenship. This Roman identity forms an important element to this chapter of Acts, as the gospel impacts a thoroughly Greco-Roman culture. It is the first time that the gospel impacts the dominant culture of the day: Roman. And America is today's Rome.

Philippi prided itself on its Roman-ness **[image 3]**. As a colony, it had a Roman form of government, was free from tribute and taxation, and used Roman law in its local and external matters. Roman citizenship was prized by its citizens and Roman culture was valued as the pinnacle of human wisdom. Therefore, Luke describes the gospel's impact on this city more than on any other European city, because he endeavors to show how the gospel impacts Roman culture, the prevailing world culture of its day **[image 4]**. You can see this very clearly when Paul and Silas are

arrested, and the accusation against them is that they were advocating customs “which are not lawful for us to *accept* or *practice*, *being Romans*.” (v21)

It is in this setting, this pro-Roman culture, polytheistic but opposed to anything “non-Roman” into which the gospel arrived. Roman culture was polytheistic and inclusive, with many sects and cults, but they were intolerant of particular values and beliefs: those that believed there was one God with supreme authority and only one way to that God. In this way, Roman culture was much like our current culture. “Tolerant” of many gods and truth claims, except the ones which claim full and absolute authority and an exclusive way to God. Unbounded sexual expression as a staple of such tolerance, and even the cause and foundation of such a claim. This is why sexual liberty dominates religious liberty, as we are seeing grow and increase in our society as well. And violence against opposing views is justified, as we will see in their arrest without just cause or fair treatment. This, too, is becoming more acceptable in our day and age. Judicial coercion, social coercion, and economic coercion are increasing as tools of silencing the conscientious liberties of those who believe God’s Word.

Luke informs us how the good news of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension impacted a culture like ours. Therefore, this chapter of Acts is a very fitting and significant chapter for us to see how God works, so that we do not lose hope in God’s work in our city and nation, and so that we do not drift away from working to see those whom God has prepared for Himself hear and respond to the gospel.

Throughout the chapter, we will see four responses to the gospel in a pluralistic culture. Here, through the woman Lydia, we see how it is received. After that, through the slave girl and her masters, we will see how it is rejected, and Paul and Silas will be jailed. Thirdly, we will see how it is redemptive when God intervenes again and the one who held them captive in the jail repents and is saved. Finally, we will see how it is repulsive, as the leaders of this pluralistic city would rather they just go away than have to face into the claims which the gospel makes.

For today, however, we will look only at the first impact. The impact of its reception in verses 11-15. **For, though Philippi is largely opposed to the gospel, we**

find that God has people in every city, and the gospel always prevails, even in such animosity, to deliver those whom He has prepared for Himself.

Though the vision Paul received was of a Man of Macedonia, what we behold is again how God works the unexpected thing. For, in Philippi, this leading Macedonian city, steeped in Roman culture, the gospel is received not by a Man, or a soldier, or a Roman politician, but by a business-woman from Thyatira. And it was God who prepared this, and her, to hear and to receive the gospel.

The first thing see is that God had gone ahead of them and prepared someone unexpected for the gospel. She. There's the first surprise. The vision had been of a man, a representative of Macedonia, but the one God first prepared was a woman. Luke calls her a God-fearing woman. This means a proselyte worshipper of YHWH, a Gentile who rejected her pagan beliefs and entrusted herself to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus, God prepared her by previous revelation of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, to hear the gospel of Abraham's true seed, Jesus the Christ.

Likewise, there are those among us with previous workings of God through the revelation of God. Do we consider these ones when we evangelize? God prepares people from every walk of life, even those who have appeared to have chosen differently. You don't get to see the secret works of God. Neither did Paul and Silas and Timothy. They spoke to all these women, and far as we know, it was only Lydia who believed them.

Her presence at the river tells us a few things **[image]**. First, the fact that the apostles "supposed there was a place of prayer by the river" indicates that there was no synagogue in Philippi. It required 10 Jewish men to have a local synagogue, and the fact that the apostles went down to the river "on the Sabbath" indicates that there was no synagogue there. **It was customary for Jews without a synagogue to gather together on Sabbath by rivers.** This is why the Psalmist says in Psalm 137, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept." They lamented in prayer because of their affliction and exile and sin.

This, then, means that there were not even 10 Jewish men wanting to worship in Philippi! Remember Sodom and Gomorrah, whom Abraham tried to negotiate with God if he could find even 10 righteous men. Sodom and Gomorrah were judged, but Philippi is being redeemed. The gospel is powerful to transform and the time of redemption has arrived in Christ. He is undoing the Curse! Even in the darkest places imaginable, God works the wonders of salvation. Remember this when your job feels dark, your schools deepen into institutional depravity, and your cities keep pursuing that which destroys souls. God works silently, subversively, underneath what you can see. The surface of Lake Mead is still, but powerful turbines churn underneath, producing mega-watts of power. So it is with God in the places that look so waveless.

Though there was no synagogue, we find this woman down by the river, praying. She wasn't at the pagan temple, where business contacts would be better, where wealth and networking opportunities and 'happening' community would be. She didn't go to the popular religious building because they had great programs, fun events, and great music. She went to the river because that's where the Lord's faithful people were. Where they *prayed*. Where they lamented the loss, the exile, the sorrows, and reminded one another of the hope of the Lord's promises, even though the cost may have been high to her reputation among her peers.

I mean, why weren't there 10 Jewish men in Philippi, do you think? Is it not probable that the Philippians made it difficult for Jewish men to settle and thrive there? Were they so Roman that anything Jewish was viewed not merely with disdain, but with outright hostility? Thessalonica had a synagogue. Berea had a synagogue. But Philippi, that Roman colony which prided itself on its Roman citizenship and history, did not. There were most likely direct opposition to Jews there, through threats of violence, and indirect coercion, through economic and social exclusion in the marketplace and political places, which made it extremely difficult to settle there.

Yet, in this place God had prepared a woman. Unlike Lot's wife, she did not pine for the culture's affluence or applause. She, like Moses, deemed its riches to be

worthless in comparison to the eternal city of God. Like Rahab and Ruth before her, she was prepared by God for God through the Word of God.

To her, praying to the one true God was vitally significant. She and the other women gathered there cried out to the LORD through prayer. The fact that they spent the Sabbath there reveals the depths of their faith in His promises and presence in spite of the animosity and ridicule of their culture. It was their lifeline in a culture bent against their God. It was to God they lamented. It was to God they cried out to for help. It was God in whom they placed their hope in such a place. So, they gathered to pray. Have we anything to learn from this? The implication is obvious.

There at the river, gathered to pray with her fellow female worshippers, God sent these outsiders. And consider these men. They were expecting a Macedonian man, I presume, yet when they arrived they saw women gathered...and they didn't even blink or pause for a moment to include these women in the calling of God. Why? Because **God calls all kinds of people without partiality.**

They sat down. That is, they didn't take a position of power or force or belittlement. They sat down on the stone path or the rocky riverbank with the women and were speaking with them. The word here is speaking, not preaching, or announcing, or heralding. They were speaking, the gospel, for sure, but it was informal and intimate.

You see, God views women with all the significance and value of men in His kingdom. Differing design and differing roles and differing bodies does not imply differing value. And the gospel? The gospel is for all kinds of people without partiality.

Now, this would have been scandalous to Romans, who held that women were not equal to men. In fact, some Roman poets considered women a different, and inferior, species! Women were usually not allowed to hold public office, to testify in court, or even to control their own assets. Even if they brought those assets into

the marriage. Thus, this woman's inclusion was scandalous in her culture, and God included her fully...and firstly.

The gospel is for outsiders, the rejected, the belittled, the mistreated. The Christ is the promise-fulfillment for all, not merely the strongest. It is by being bound together with Him that we find honor. In His service, there is great reputation and a name.

Now, the fact that Luke includes this story, and with so much detail, is actually a proof of its, and the entire book of Acts', veracity. Why? Well, because by including this inclusion of a woman, Luke makes the gospel appear as weak to Romans. It was not a convincing point, but a demerit to its legitimacy in the dominant culture.

In fact, **the Roman historian, Suetonius, refers to Christians as "a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition"** because of their devotion to Christ alone (see Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars, Nero. 16*). By using the word *superstitio* rather than *religio*, he indicates that he considers Christianity to be outside of acceptable Roman practice. Ironically, today, the word "religion" is equitable with "superstition", and is used by much of our society to make it outside the acceptable practice of supposedly wise people.

Pliny the Younger, the governor of Bithynia in the late first century, also refers to Christianity as a "depraved and excessive superstition" which endangered people "of every age and every rank" in both urban cities and rural villages (Pliny the Younger, *Letter to Trajan, Book 10*). **And the Roman writer, Celsus, in the 2nd century argued against the doctrines of Christianity on the basis that "it is only foolish and low individuals, and persons devoid of perception, and slaves, and women, and children, of whom the teachers of the divine word wish to make converts."** (Origen, *Against Celsus*)

These three quotes from important Greco-Roman writers show us how Romans viewed the Christian position: as a dangerous and foolish superstition, partly because it was believed by women. Yet, Luke includes this story, proving to us that

he is simply telling the truth, because it hurts its plausibility in the eyes of his culture to include such a claim. Not only does he include it, but he includes Lydia by name and gives us her occupation, making tracking her down to verify facts a very simple act. The book of Acts is not a cleverly devised tale to gain power. It wouldn't have. It would have lost influence in the culture. So, how did the Church thrive against all the odds and without external coercion or violence? God works subversively in the hearts of people. It's true.

How does God include this woman? **Not merely by making her the same offer as everyone else, but specifically by opening her heart to value the gospel.** You see, the ultimate cause of Lydia's reception of the gospel, and thereby her freely willing inclusion in the faith, is God Himself. He chose Lydia. He wanted Lydia. So, He opened her heart. And the fact that Luke uses this phrase indicates that her heart was closed to Paul's words before God acted. You see, Luke wants us to know that God's love and redemption, His sovereign heart, is for Romans, too. And Macedonians, and Lydians, and Thyatirans, because He does not wait for dead hearts to make themselves alive, for closed hearts to open themselves up, for idolatrous hearts to value Him rightly. He acts first to secure their redemption.

Look at the sphere of God's opening work: it is the heart. It is not the will. The will, that ability to choose what one wants to do, is never restrained by anything but the heart. The heart is the seat of our affections. It is the foundation of our values, our loves, our desires, of aesthetics, what we find to be beautiful. The will always chooses what it wants the most in a given moment. It freely does so. Thus, the problem is not in the human will, but in the aesthetic, the heart's apprehension and valuation of beautiful and good and right.

Thus, what God opened was Lydia's apprehension of beauty, affecting, as beauty does, what she wanted to behold. He made her dead heart, which loved dead things, alive so that it loved something new: Jesus as her glory. And when Paul spoke the words of Life, she apprehended them as beautiful, good, right, and true. Without His sovereign act, she would have heard them, even intellectually

understood them, but she would not have *valued* them, but considered them to be, as other Gentiles did, foolishness.

Yet, at the same time, it was Lydia who “paid attention to what was spoken”. While God is ultimately the one who opened her heart, it was still Lydia who heard. It was Lydia who listened. It was Lydia who believed and wanted to be baptized. You see, in the words of the Westminster divines, **“God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor does violence to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.”** (WCF, IIIa)

In other words, **God didn’t coerce her to believe.** Nor did He, by primary cause, make her believe. Rather, he opened her heart to see and savor Christ. Then, savoring Christ, she pursued Him freely and willingly of her own accord. Having new desires, she acted upon them. It is the same for everyone who believes in Jesus.

This is called the doctrine of regeneration. It is that secret act of God, by His sole work and sheer grace, by which He causes a dead heart, which had loved and over-valued lesser things, to be made alive, to behold God’s beauty and worth, so that the heart loves Him and values Him and appreciates Him rightly through humble and repentant faith in Him. It was Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3: “Nobody even sees the Kingdom of God unless he is born again.” And “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (3:8) That is, you don’t see a heart reborn, you only see its effects. And you can’t control the Spirit, He blows where He wishes.

Regeneration is a regeneration of the heart, of aesthetic, the valuation of beauty, worth, and love. This is what Paul meant when He wrote the Ephesians, in chapter 3, that they were first ruined, being dead in their sins, enslaved to Satan, and condemned by God. Then, by the sovereign grace of God, they were regenerated, being made alive by God alone, according to His mercy (not their merit). Finally, they were redeemed, having been delivered from Satan and from God’s

condemnation by faith in His Son. Everything is in its proper order, and regeneration, being made alive in heart, precedes our faith, yet is never without it.

Paul tells the Corinthians in his second letter, that “God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (4:6) That is, the one who Created something from nothing has created something from nothing *in our hearts* to make us see His glory in the face of Jesus. It is an eye-opening work to behold God’s glory, so that we freely and joyfully believe as we see Jesus.

Sometimes we fear this doctrine because we fear that regeneration and faith may be separated. Yet, they never are. We fear, or call it unfair or unjust, that God would regenerate a person against their will, or not regenerate a person though they do will it. Yet, these persons don’t exist.

Everybody gets what they *want*:

1. If one *wants* God for God (because He has regenerated their hearts), then *they receive* God.
2. If one *doesn’t want* God for God (for their hearts are dead in sin), then *they don’t receive* God.

Those whom God has chosen	Those whom God has not chosen	
All those saved by God’s election through faith in Jesus. All believers in Jesus are in this category. 2 Thessalonians 2:13 ALL BELIEVERS ARE HERE	There is nobody who is not elect who will believe in Jesus because original sin, a depraved and dead heart, dictates that they will always refuse to believe in Him NOBODY EXISTS HERE	Those who believe in Jesus
There is nobody whom God elects who will not believe in Jesus. All who have been chosen by God are regenerated by His Spirit, overcoming original sin, made alive to see the beauty of Jesus, and will believe in Him. NOBODY EXISTS HERE	All unbelievers who refuse to believe in Jesus, are not regenerated by God, and thus were not chosen by God. ALL UNBELIEVERS ARE HERE	Those who don’t believe in Jesus

All who believe have already had their hearts opened by God, so that nobody can boast, except in the Lord. And anyone who doesn't believe, doesn't want to believe, nor would he without divine intervention, thus no violence is done to His will, to the glory of God.

This is why “paying attention” is such an important word to describe our response to the gospel as we believe. It means much more than merely “to hear” or “to listen.” It means “to be on the alert, in order to take action” or “to fix one’s mind upon something for the purpose the obligations implied.” In other words, it means to listen in order to take action accordingly. Lydia responded with being baptized, and then she wanted to participate in the gospel through hospitality. She risked her reputation for the sake of the gospel, to be counted with those whom the world hated. She listened to God’s Word in order to act accordingly.

Peter uses the same phrase when he writes in his 2nd letter, “let us fix our attention on the prophetic word made more sure, *as to a lamp shining in the darkness.*”

(1:19) That is, it lights our path so that we can walk rightly. Walking is the obligation for which we fix our attention. The author of Hebrews shows how such an act implies the necessity of following what one is giving attention to when he states, “For this reason [to which he means the person and work of Christ], then, let us fix our attention to what we have heard, *lest we drift away from it.*” (2:1)

Thus, while God opened our hearts, it is we who fix our attention upon His Word in order to know how to respond, how to live, how to love, what to do accordingly.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, how shall we listen to His Word? How shall we “fix our attention” upon the gospel? Do you just swing by and hear the words, but not to fix your attention, lest you drift away? Do you ponder it, in order to take action upon the path ahead of you, enlightened by His holy Word?

Consider: at the end of a long day on your feet, your back aching, your joints tired, and you draw a hot bath to ease your afflictions, to renew and strengthen your body for the next day, how do you “pay attention” to the hot water? Do you just drop in and climb back out again? A 2-minute bath? No!

Oh, that hot, steaming water, you slowly and gingerly sink into it, its heat hurts at first, but you know its restoration is coming.

So, you lean in and ponder its penetration into your pores!

You bask in the balm upon your bones!

You muse upon its ministry to your muscles!

In the same way, then, let us ruminate upon the Lord's Word for its refreshment of our souls and its restoration of our affections so that we might be renewed in hope for tomorrow's journey.

Let us fix our attention, our loves, our desires, our delights, our hopes, upon the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Ushers come forward. Pass out the bread. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are free to join with us. If you have not yet set Jesus apart as Lord in your heart, then please do not be ashamed, but let the plate pass you by, and observe only. This is for those to whom Jesus is EVERYTHING. Please hold it in your hand as we respond in song. Then, we will eat it together, fixing our attention upon Christ.

This Memorial. This moment of musing in the Lord's Supper, is the means by which we fix our attention upon the glory of God's greatest work: the substitution of His Son for our sins. In this bread, we fix our attention upon His body, broken for us. In His sacrifice, we behold the greatness of His love. We see His beauty, and we want Him. We want to know Him. We want to love Him more. We want to entrust ourselves to Him.

Take this bread between your fingers. It is broken, when you squeeze it. It tears, when you strain its edges and stretch it beyond its bounds. At the cross, Jesus was squeezed with by all which squeezes you. Your fears, your sorrows, your shames. What are your fears now? He bore them. What is your sorrow today? He knows them. For what do you feel ashamed today? He feels it, too. Our sin, and the sins against us, and all the implications of our depraved mutiny and its ensuing curse of

condemnation and ruin were born in this brokenness. Break that bread and fix your attention upon the King who gave Himself for you.

Pass out the cup.

In this cup we fix our attention upon His blood, poured out for the many, for the forgiveness of sins. Take this cup in your hands. Ponder what it means. Consider how you shall respond as I read these words to us from the Spirit:

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. ²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. ²⁸ Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? ...Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷ For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; ³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." ³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but we are those who have faith and preserve their souls...Therefore...let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy

that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”