



DAY ONE: SENSING THE SPIRIT'S LEADING

Asters are the stars of the autumn garden making them the great late bloomers. Some call them the heroes of the fall. When all the other flowers begin to fade, they take center stage. Their name comes from the ancient Greek word that means *star*, referring to the shape of the flower head. Lydia stars as the first convert in Europe on Paul's second missionary journey making her a latecomer to Christianity. In heroic fashion, however, her salvation was contagious as she championed the gospel throughout Philippi.

In Acts 15, we see Paul embarking on his second missionary journey with the goal to “go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing” (v. 36). Assisting him on the journey was Silas before Timothy joined them on their first stop. The trio journeyed through multiple cities as “the churches were strengthened in the faith” (Acts 16:5).

That's when the Holy Spirit interrupted their plans with a couple of no gos. They had come from the southeast and longed to head southwest to Asia, but “they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit” (v. 6). Then they set their hearts toward Bithynia in the north when “the Spirit did not permit them” (v. 7). That left just one direction—true west. During the night, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia (you guessed it, in the west) beckoning them for help.

For Paul, God's nos were as important as His gos. The Holy Spirit is in control of the stops and starts of our lives and we should be just as thankful when He throws us a roadblock. He may have something better for us down a path we've never traveled before. What is stunning is that although God revealed a man from Macedonia in Paul's vision, Paul meets a group of women by the river in Philippi—Lydia, in particular. It turns out that the “man of Macedonia” (v. 9) was probably a woman! Although she was a late bloomer discovered on Paul's second missionary journey, she was perfectly placed in God's timetable of events. God had plans for Lydia, Philippi, and this particular region of Macedonia.



This region had strategic value. Alexander the Great longed to rule this region to fulfill his dream to conquer the east and west to create a one world rule. But God had a greater plan than Alexander. He planned to make the world one in Christ with the gospel from this tactical vantage point. Paul's vision would see that plan realized.

Read the verses below and answer the following questions:

“Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’” (Acts 16:6-9).

Practical Observation:

1. Previous texts revealed that the travelers included Paul, Silas, and Timothy. According to verse 6, where had they been and where did they hope to travel?
2. Explain what they had hoped to achieve in these places.
3. Describe the work of the Holy Spirit in their pursuit.
4. According to verse 7, where did they go next, and then where did they proceed?
5. Explain how the Holy Spirit responded to this second leg of the journey.
6. What experience did Paul have in Troas? How do you think it impacted the apostle?

3. Preach the word
means to preach the gospel. Gospel literally means good news. Jesus came to the world to forgive those who believe that He is the Son of God who died and rose again to pay the penalty for our sins. Paul said, “I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named” (Romans 15:20).

5. The Holy Spirit *is the third person of the Trinity. He comes to convict the world of sin and draw people to Jesus. He also helps believers learn to walk with Christ. He is known as the Helper, from the Greek word paraclete, who stays with God's people between Christ's ascension and return.*

6. Macedonia *is a mountainous country to the north of Greece. Its first mention in the Bible is found in Acts 16. It was ruled by the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Ottomans. It became a modern country again in 1991.*



Personal Application:

- a. Describe a time in your life when the Holy Spirit said no to you. How did it make you feel? What lessons did you learn?
- b. Have you ever had a vision? If you have, describe the experience. If not, list some ways the Holy Spirit has led you in the past.
- c. Has God provided people to join you on your Christian journey? Who are they? Describe a time they helped you make a decision.

a. No is one of the three ways God answers prayer. Yes is the second. Wait is the third. Sometimes His delays are not His denials. Paul eventually went to Asia. Perhaps at this time their hearts were not ready for God's Word. "This continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10).

b. Visions is one of the supernatural ways God speaks to His people. Dreams happen at night while visions are given while a person is awake. People in both the Old and New Testament experienced visions. Usually, they were God's way of giving guidance or direction.

DAY TWO: SAILING TO PHILIPPI

Some flowers are worth the journey. Hundreds of thousands of people travel each year to the foot of Mount Fuji for the Fuji Shibazakura Festival to admire a carpet of 800,000 pink phlox moss flowers that span miles along the basin. It's a long way to go, but tourists from all over the world say these rolling fields of pink are worth it. If Paul could have flown from Cyprus to Philippi by airplane, the trip would be 640 miles. We know that his journey was largely by boat and by foot, taking months for him to hopscotch his way to the foremost city of Macedonia. I'm confident that the apostle thought the journey to meet Lydia the aster far exceeded his expectation because of the beauty and grace she spread throughout the land. In fact, one day he would make that journey again.

Beside the arduous elements of this journey, there was an urgency as the men immediately left for Macedonia. They didn't linger in Troas, a beautiful port city on the Aegean Sea, situated in Greece near the tip of Turkey. Instead they "ran a straight course to Samothrace" (v. 11). The next day they arrived in Neapolis but kept going until they reached Philippi.

Philippi received its name from Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, in 356 BC. It was abandoned, however, in the fourteenth century after the Ottoman conquest, and it lies in ruins to this day. But it enjoyed a storied history. The Macedonians conquered it to control the neighboring gold mines. Eventually, it was included in the great royal trade route known as the Via Egnatia that ran east-west between Macedonia and Rome. Although a small city, the Roman empire built important fortifications including a "forum the size of a football field, an open-air theater, two large temples, public buildings, a library, and Roman baths."¹ The likes of Mark Antony and Octavian, the heirs of Caesar, fought battles there. Paul gave his inaugural sermon to the European continent in Philippi, and it became one of the oldest congregations in Europe.

¹Thomas Nelson, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Thomas Nelson, 1995), 984.

Read the verses below and answer the following questions:

“Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them. Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and the next day came to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony. And we were staying in that city for some days” (Acts 16:10-12).

Practical Observation:

1. Describe how Paul and his travel companions responded to his vision.
2. Explain how you think they came to their conclusion.
3. List the cities they traveled to and their final destination.
4. Where in Macedonia was the city of Philippi located? Describe the effort it might take to journey there.
5. What was the length of their stay in Philippi, and why do you think this was the case?

1. Immediately means instantly or at once. If you look up the word in your Bible concordance, you discover that when Jesus performed a miracle, the cure often came immediately. Whether leprosy, demon possession, or the bleeding woman, the commands of Jesus were fulfilled in the blink of an eye.

2. Called is a biblical term that carries three facets: First, God calls us to salvation, to come out of the darkness and into the light. Second, He calls us to consecration, a fancy way to say godly living—to be holy as He is holy. Finally, He calls us to serve others. Whether you’re a handyman or a hair stylist, God calls you to Himself with everything you are, do, or have.

Personal Application:

- a. Describe a time God spoke to you with a sense of urgency. How did you respond?
- b. List some ways you share the gospel with others. Write a prayer asking the Holy Spirit to give you a sense of urgency.

b. Sharing the gospel is not just the job of professionals but a job for all Christians of all times. In fact, Jesus called sharing it the Great Commission. He said, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:15-16, NIV). Going into the world may be going next door, to school, or to the gym.



- c. Is there someplace where or someone with whom you think God is calling you to share the gospel? Write down practical ways to fulfill this vision.

c. Uttermost means to the outermost region with the utmost capacity. Paul and his team were willing to go as far and as hard as the Holy Spirit led them. Jesus, too, longs to reach those both near and far. “He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25).

DAY THREE: SPEAKING BY THE RIVER

The aster *novi-belgii* native to the United States are often seen growing in moist marsh-like conditions implying that a water source is nearby. Have you noticed the great significance water played throughout this text? Paul sailed across many bodies of water to arrive in Philippi. Likewise, his first worship experience was near a river. It was the most likely place to meet Lydia since Philippi was known by its surrounding marshlands.

Lydia sold purple, which perfectly showcases our aster since the flower comes in a variety of purples from lavender to deep purple. Did you know that purple and water were closely related during this time period? Purple was the most precious and costly color of ancient dyes because it was derived from a shellfish found in the Mediterranean Sea. It took 250,000 of these mollusks to make just one ounce of dye, which explains the high price for cloth drenched in this royal color.

Thyatira, the city Lydia hailed from before moving to Philippi, was known for its many artist guilds and one of these included dyers. The water in this region was famous for dyeing and the unique color purple produced there was renown worldwide. As a seller of purple, Lydia was likely wealthy, artistic, and a keen businesswoman. She was an independent woman who attained a great reputation because of her prosperous business. No doubt she had a spacious home, many employees at the mill, and several servants to attend to her personal needs. Isn't it encouraging that working women graced the pages of Scripture? Many of them helped advance the spreading of the gospel.

We are not given any information on her background while she lived in Thyatira. However, archeologists suggest it was a metropolitan city since the writings on monuments found there included inscriptions in multiple languages. Apollo, the Greek god of the sun, was the main god worshiped there. We don't know if Lydia was Jewish but we do know that she “worshiped God” (Acts 16:14). Perhaps she was a proselyte. We do know that she was ripe for the gospel, and a bit of watering of the Word from Paul would make this lady blossom to her full potential.

Read the verses below and answer the following questions:

“And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:13-14).

1. Riversides were often places of worship for Jewish believers when their community did not meet the requirements for a synagogue. Synagogue comes from the Hebrew word *kneset*, which means house of assembly. They provided a place for prayer and the reading of the Torah.



Practical Observation:

1. Where did Paul journey on the Sabbath day and why?
2. What group of people did they meet, and what did they do?
3. Who is named in this text? What was her occupation?
4. Where did the woman come from originally? What indicates she was religious?
5. Describe her response to Paul's preaching.

Personal Application:

- a. Where and how do you celebrate the Sabbath?
- b. Who are the people you fellowship with? Why are they important in your life?
- c. Describe a time God opened your heart and how you responded.

3. Worship is much more than singing praises on Sunday morning. It carries the idea of an unabandoned devotion to God shown through reverential actions. It comes from an Old English word focusing on the worthiness of the one being honored. The Hebrews believed God should be worshiped with all the heart, mind, soul, and strength.

5. Open heart describes the inner self that thinks, feels, and decides. It often refers to some aspect of the human personality. Conversion work is a work of the heart. "For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved" (Romans 10:10, NLT).

a. Prayer must be part of our worship. Simply put, it is us talking to God. The many forms of prayer include personal request, intercession for the lost, thanksgiving, and repentance. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6, NIV).

b. Partners are vital in the Christian life. The Bible talks about the power of we, exalting the concept of two or more collaborating in the work of the gospel. Jesus sent the disciples out two by two, as there is safety in numbers. "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20).



DAY FOUR: SPREADING THE GOSPEL

Asters are hardy plants that grow one to six feet tall and one to four feet wide. They eventually grow into more of a bush than a flower with hairy leaves and flowers similar to daisies. Some plants grow so tall that horticulturists suggest providing a stake or cage to keep them from falling over in the fall. Just like the towering aster, Lydia's roots ran deep and wide. Her faith took off like a weed reaching her family, friends, and the community.

Faith multiplies when it goes public and that's exactly what Lydia's did. As a well-known businesswoman, she had to know that her public baptism would cause a stir in Philippi. Yet she did not shrink back in fear that her business would suffer because of her profession of faith. Rather, she served as an example for others who saw her business grow under God's blessing. As her business flourished, she probably used much of her profit to further the gospel.

Lydia the aster was the first to be baptized in the waters of Europe and immediately her entire household followed. Before this revival, there were not enough men in the community to sustain a synagogue as it required ten men. That's why the women met at the river, as it provided water for Jewish ceremonial rituals. Now, instead of a synagogue, we see a church spring from the wells of salvation and likely it began in Lydia's home where she begged the apostle and his friends to not only visit but stay. Women, don't forget to open both your heart and your home to the gospel. Lydia's faith was persuasive.

Evidence of Lydia's sincere faith was manifest almost immediately through the Holy Spirit's gift of hospitality. She wanted all that she had to advance the gospel. Many commentators believe that Lydia was a widow since no husband was mentioned. Paul wrote to Timothy about the qualities to look for in godly widows: "No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the Lord's people, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds" (1 Timothy 5:9-10, NIV). If you are a widow, God has plans for you and the church needs you. Hospitality and good works are the nectar of kindness to passersby, and like the thistle, butterflies love to enjoy the nourishment found in an aster.

Read the verse below and answer the following questions:

"And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.' So she persuaded us" (Acts 16:15).

Practical Observation:

1. Who did Lydia tell about her experience?
2. Describe how these people responded.

1. Household is a word that meant more to the ancients than it does to the modern ear. People in the Middle East lived together often in multigenerational families. Household included slaves, concubines, and servants. At the end of Acts 16, Paul brought salvation to the Philippian jailer's entire household. "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household" (Acts 16:31, NIV).



3. What did Lydia request of Paul and his partners? How did she make this request?
4. What evaluation did she request of her guests?
5. How did Paul and his company respond?

2. Baptism is an outward expression of the inward change of salvation. In it we see our past sins buried beneath the water and then we rise up cleansed to new life. Both Jews and Christians included this ritual in their religion. Jesus declared it essential when He said, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16, NIV).

Personal Application:

- a. List the members of your family with whom you've shared the gospel. Write how each responded next to their names.
- b. Describe a time you invited someone to your home to influence your family with the gospel. If you have not, journal about who you could invite and when.
- c. Do you think your pastor would consider you faithful to the Lord like Lydia? Why or why not?

c. Faithful describes someone who is dependable, loyal, and stable in their relationship to God and as a result to others. Jesus said the two greatest commands were to love God and to love others as ourselves. If you do these two things, they add up to fulfilling all the other laws.

DAY FIVE: SHARING HER HOSPITALITY

Asters can grow in all hardiness zones, which means they can take a beating and prosper in less than desirable soil. *Hardiness* describes a plant's ability to thrive in adverse conditions, surviving even freezing temperatures. They also grow best with "tough love," meaning they're good in a pinch and can self-propagate, which serves to lengthen their growing season long past summer and into the fall.

Suffering saint, maybe God has allowed trials, testing, or tempests in your life to help you flourish far into the future. For you, the best truly is yet to come. God can trust you with difficulty knowing that you will bloom when all others have faded away. Cancer came to me in my fifties. My pinch included the removal of a



tumor and a portion of my colon as well as the end of hormone replacement therapy. But I've learned that Christ is the big *C* and cancer is the little *c*.

Following my recovery, I founded Reload Love, a nonprofit organization that turns bullets into beauty by melting down spent casings to upcycle into fashionable jewelry. All the profit goes to aiding children impacted by terror. I've crawled through ISIS tunnels in Iraq, traversed the mountainous regions of the Karen people in Myanmar, and driven the dusty roads of Jordan to bring relief to refugees, internally displaced people, and victims of armed conflict in order to show children that God cares, He's there, and He hears their prayers.

One way Reload Love accomplishes this is by building playgrounds in places where terror used to reign. So far, we've built forty-seven playgrounds in places like Nigeria, Iraq, Thailand, Pakistan, and Cambodia. We also provide trauma relief, medical supplies, academic programs, and safe spaces for children victimized by terror.

Lydia witnessed the revival in her city turn into persecution. Paul and his teammates saw the multitudes turn against them. The civic leaders beat them with rods and whipped them with many stripes. Eventually, they were arrested, imprisoned, and locked in stocks.

While the apostle was behind bars, Lydia opened her house to the brethren. Following a miraculous deliverance from prison because of an earthquake, the prison keeper and his entire household were saved. After being released, Paul sought Lydia's abode as the place to find shelter and relief. Her home became a center of Christian fellowship in Philippi and was likely the first home church in the region.

Asters are important plants in gardens, wildflower meadows, and roadsides because of their late-blooming nectar for bees and butterflies. Every garden should include them for this very reason. By the way, did you know that Euodia and Syntyche were from Philippi? Perhaps Lydia was one of the believers Paul urged to help these rivaling ladies to reconcile.

Read the verse below and answer the following questions:

“So they went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia; and when they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and departed” (Acts 16:40).

Practical Observation:

1. Review what happened between verses 15 and 40, then list the major events.

2. Describe the incredible deliverance from prison Paul and his partners experienced.

3. Where did Paul go after being released from prison, and why do you think this was his choice?

4. Who else did the apostle meet in this home?

5. What did the apostle and his friends do before they departed?

3. Church describes a local group of believers who put their faith in Jesus Christ. The term is rarely mentioned in the Gospels, as the church era didn't begin until Pentecost in the book of Acts. There is also the universal church that describes all the saints of all the ages without reference to a specific place or time.

5. Encouragement is the act of inspiring someone to courage or confidence. It incentivizes a person to action or advancement. An encourager also restores hope to the hopeless. Paul said we should all practice this virtue. "So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing" (1 Thessalonians 5:11, NLT).

Personal Application:

- a. Have you ever felt trapped by your circumstances? Describe the situation and how God delivered you.

- b. If Paul visited your city, where do you think he would go and who do you think he would meet?

- c. Describe a time you encouraged another person. How did you do it? How did it make them feel?

a. Deliverance speaks of being set free. Paul was literally delivered from prison. The psalmist praised the Lord for delivering him from enemies, death, fears, and distress. God is our ultimate deliverer. We are encouraged to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:13).

c. One another is mentioned in the Bible repeatedly in commands for believers to love, serve, encourage, and instruct one another. God does not intend for man or woman to be alone. We thrive when we join a church, a prayer group, or a family. We truly are better together.

*When I go up through the mowing field,
The headless aftermath,
Smooth-laid like thatch with the heavy dew,
Half closes the garden path.*

*And when I come to the garden ground,
The whirl of sober birds
Up from the tangle of withered weeds
Is sadder than any words.*

*A tree beside the wall stands bare,
But a leaf that lingered brown,
Disturbed, I doubt not, by my thought,
Comes softly rattling down.*

*I end not far from my going forth
By picking the faded blue
Of the last remaining aster flower
To carry again to you.*

—Robert Frost

HOW TO GROW ASTERS

As summer flowers begin to wither, asters blossom in late summer and fall to bring vibrance and beauty to many gardens. They are “daisy-like perennials with starry-shaped flower heads that range in color from white to blue to purple.... Asters also attract bees and butterflies, providing the pollinators with an important late-season supply of nectar.”²

- Light: Full sun is best; some types will grow in part shade.
- Soil: Grows best on well-drained, loamy soil.
- Spacing: Space plants one to four feet apart.
- Planting: Plant asters anytime during the growing season, but they do best in late summer to early fall. Allow the roots to get established before winter.³

²“Growing Asters: How to Plant, Grow, and Care for Aster Flowers,” The Old Farmer’s Almanac, accessed June 18, 2021, <https://www.almanac.com/plant/asters#>.

³“How to Grow Aster,” American Meadows, accessed June 18, 2021, <https://www.americanmeadows.com/perennials/aster/how-to-grow-aster>.

