

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Michael Billester visited a small town in Poland in the mid 1930s. Billester met a man in the village and gave him a single Bible. The man read the Bible and was converted to faith in Christ after reading it. The new believer then passed the book on to others. This cycle of conversions and sharing of faith continued until 200 people had become believers through that one Bible!

When Billester returned to Poland in the summer before the German invasion that kicked-off World War II, this group of Christians met together for a worship service where he was to preach the Word of God. It was usually his custom to ask for testimonies, but this time Billester suggested that several in the congregation stand and recite verses of Scripture.

One man stood and said, "Perhaps we have misunderstood your request. Do you mean verses or chapters?"

These Polish villagers had not memorized a few select verses of the Bible, they had memorized whole chapters and books. Thirteen people knew Matthew, Luke, and half of Genesis. And another person had committed the entire book of Psalms to memory. That single copy of the Bible given by Billester to the one new believer had certainly done its work. It had sunk deeply into the community and the hearts of those who received it. The surprising results of that gift of one small Bible had born the fruit of hundreds of lives changed.¹

¹ Compiled from several online and printed sources.

As we've seen in this series on the surprising acts of God as described in the Acts of the Apostles, God's surprises are pretty big... they're pretty major. With all of the big surprises that we find in the book of Acts, perhaps we are surprised to find the "little story old story" of Lydia recorded here. It all begins with a detour. Paul has a vision that a man in Macedonia is pleading for help. When he arrives, he finds not a man but a group of women who are gathered at the riverbank and are eager to hear his teaching. Now, this is all the more remarkable given the times and the culture, but, in the context of what Dr Luke shares with us in Acts and the Gospel that bears his name, this shouldn't be too surprising since women are honored and elevated in the faith. When Lydia opens her heart to receive the words that Paul shares about Jesus, she becomes a follower of Christ. She is a prominent woman in the community, as a dealer in purple cloth, she markets a valuable commodity. With her conversion to Christ, her life takes a major detour. It's not enough that she is baptized, but her entire household is baptized. That description of the whole household means her entire family along with slaves and servants. With their baptism, a new spark is ignited in Macedonia that could spread into a blaze.

Lives were changed in tremendous ways because of an encounter with one person. One person called by God to make a difference in the life of another person.

The book of Acts is a book of big miracles and major events. Yet, in the middle of it all, we find the story of one woman who comes to faith in Christ due to the sharing of the story by one man whose encounter with Christ set him on fire with a passion that he had never before experienced.

God has always worked to change the world one life at a time. Lydia had a choice of whether to listen and follow when she heard the Gospel that first time.

Because she opened her heart and then her home to the message of the Gospel, a new foothold for faith in Christ was established and lives were changed as a result.

As we approach the time of the Holston Annual Conference meeting at Lake Junaluska June 9-12, we have an opportunity to change lives through what we do. And you have surprised me by your actions.

After determining that the most efficient way to collect supplies for our annual hands on mission offering would be to order the requested items in bulk from stores like Dollar Tree and Dollar General, I looked at what you did last year with the exact same criteria of supplies, I looked at quantities of supplies by the case available by order and I decided to challenge you all to more than double the number of buckets collected last year for a total of 36. We would order the supplies and have a parking party here at the church. Now, I have to admit, that I almost expected to be tarred and feathered because this was an outlandish challenge (and I have to admit that I didn't mind shaming you a bit to make my case as I pointed out that a smaller church on Big Ridge always outperforms even some of the largest churches in the district with the Annual Mission Project). But you have surprised me. Barbara and I.O. talked the local manager at Lowes into donating the buckets that we needed and your offerings to supply the buckets have been almost double what I requested of you... and all of that extra money will be kept for local mission work like home repairs and ramps for persons in need of assistance.

Our Annual Conference mission offering this year raises money to provide grants to local churches and clusters of churches to be in ministry to those affected by the opioid crisis. The crisis is real right here in Rossville and it is touching members of this congregation. In this community, we have

grandparents raising grandchildren because their parents are so consumed by addiction that they cannot function as parents. We will collect this offering through next Sunday. I hope that you will be generous.

I am looking forward to working with John Oldham, the projected incoming pastor at Simpson as of July 1, and Justin Keating, the pastor at Fort Oglethorpe and Flintstone, as we seek ways to work together to address the crisis that is in our own back yard and maybe we can get some grants to address the crisis right here in Rossville... heck, when it comes to the opioid abuse crisis in our own community, we even had an incident a few months back where the drug abuse was happening on our own front porch. That's one of the reasons why the canopy lights adjacent to the sanctuary are left on 24 hours a day and 7 days a week.

Now that we have the fellowship hall available to us for ministry outreach, I foresee some movement toward community partnerships with groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous to provide a place for folks to be supported as they seek to break the chains of addiction that can steal a person's life away.

When it comes to one person or a small group of people making a difference in the lives of others, I can point to our work through the schools to get Bibles and other information in the hands of students. A great example of how we can work together was found in the annual Trunk or Treat outreach. This past year, we joined with the Rossville community and served over 1000 families with candy, fruits and vegetables, bibles, and other items that shared the Gospel with the community. Thank you, Craig, for heading up this important outreach.

This spring, we introduced a program that enables one on one evangelism at the high school level... a program that has its roots in the work of the

Gideons. We provide a text on the Gospel of John, written and commented on by students, to the FCA at the High School, and the members then take these texts and share them one on one with other students opening the door to lead them to Christ. This program is free to us. I place the order for the books and Craig makes them available to the FCA.

Here at McFarland I have seen the outcome of personal outreach as persons who are clients at the Free Store are invited to come and worship with us. Over the past couple of years, these invitations have led to 12 new members of our church, with most of those folks still active on a regular basis.

The common idea may be that one person doesn't make a difference. But that's a lie. It is a lie that is supported by the devil. The truth is that one person can make a tremendous difference in the lives of others. We need to believe that and act upon it.

281 years ago this past Friday, John Wesley went to a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. He had already completed his studies at Oxford University where he founded the Holy Club with their peculiar methods that led to the derisive term "methodists" to describe the members. He had already come to America to preach in Savannah, where he met and fell in love with a young lady named Sophy Hopkey. And, when Sophey spurned his romantic overtures, he denied her communion in the Church of England... an act that led to him being driven out of the Georgia colony and back home to England.

The Aldersgate prayer meeting was opened by a reading from Martin Luther's commentary *A Preface to the Letter to the Romans*. During the reading, Wesley had an encounter with the Holy Spirit in which his heart was "strangely warmed" and he knew the saving grace and power of God in his life for the first time, although he had been an ordained priest in the Church of England for

several years. That encounter led to the Methodist Movement, a movement that was intended to be a revival movement in the Church of England that ended up becoming a church, first in North America after the Revolution and then extending around the world.

One voice. Singing in the darkness.

Making a difference. One life at a time.

That's what we are today.

The darkness is real. But the darkness doesn't overcome the light of Christ.

Each one of us can make a difference in the lives of others. If we only take the chance.

I pray that we take the chance.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.