

Misfits, Leaders, Disciples, and Prophets: 12 Amazing Women of the Bible
Part 3: Lydia and Priscilla
May 12, 2019

I. Meet Priscilla

Good morning! My name is Priscilla – or Prisca for short. “Priscilla” means “ancient.” “Ancient” may seem like a strange name for a parent to give their child. In the modern world, it’s embarrassing to be called “old,” let alone “ancient”! Old people are like Rodney Dangerfield: they “don’t get no respect.” But in my day, “old” things were considered “good” things – because they stood the test of time. My name, therefore, was like being called “Venerable,” or “Worthy of Respect.” Isn’t it funny how times change?

My husband, Aquila, and I were citizens of Rome and pagans before we converted to Christianity, which was simply called “The Way” back then. Not only did we convert to “The Way,” but we became prominent evangelists and church leaders.

Why did we convert? I’m glad you asked! But in order to understand, you have to know a bit about Roman paganism. In this religion, like others in the ancient world, there are lots of gods and goddesses running around “upstairs.” And they’re constantly bickering, fighting, and betraying each other. The gods are really like an enormous, messed up family, just as we find among humans.

When the gods come “downstairs” to interact with us, now and then, they take their quarreling and fighting with them. Human beings are little more than helpless pawns in the power struggles of the gods. If you’re “lucky” enough to meet up with a god who truly cares about you, you’re actually the least lucky of all. Some other god is sure to either become jealous and hurt you, or that god may destroy you just to hurt the one who favors you.

The world of the gods is cold, cruel, and unfair. In other words, it’s exactly like *our* world. In fact, you could say that the whole construct of Roman religion is meant to answer the perennial question of why there is so much pain and suffering in our world. *The gods are responsible!* If it weren’t for the gods, we might stand a fighting chance of creating something better for ourselves.

Passing human suffering off on the gods might sound primitive to you, but have things really changed so much? If you suffer a string of setbacks, one after the other, don’t you shake your fist at the heavens sometimes, or assume you’ve done something to upset God?

The problem that my husband and I had with our religion is the same problem we have with those who blame human suffering on God today: It just seems like a cop-out. It’s a lot easier to blame an invisible, divine being for human suffering than humans themselves. When we hear people ask, in your day, how God can love us when there’s so much pain and suffering in the world, that sounds like a pagan question in our ears. Just who do you think is responsible for things like warfare and poverty? Is it God, or us? It may be *easier* to blame forces that are outside of our control, but that doesn’t make it right.

Promoting the idea that human suffering is to be blamed on the gods is a great strategy for anyone who has power and privilege and wants to keep it. They can say, “Your suffering has nothing to do with my greed, or my envy, or my lust for power and control – so don’t look too closely at what I’m doing. Look to the gods if you’re looking for someone to blame!”

My husband and I didn’t buy it. When we looked out at Creation, for instance, it just didn’t make sense that whatever power placed us in the midst of all this beauty – this veritable Garden of Eden – would simultaneously stab us in the back by acting like the gods. In fact, it seemed to us that whoever created all this beauty must be amazingly generous to allow us to inhabit the Earth despite our violence, greed, and lack of appreciation for our blessings. Generous and patient! And kind. And forgiving. In other words, this God must be nothing like the gods of Rome.

When my husband and I first heard of Jesus, we heard that he preached loving one’s enemies over hating them. He taught about Prodigal Sons who were welcomed home by their Father despite squandering his inheritance. We heard about how Jesus preferred to spend time among “prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners” in order to heal them of their hurts rather than spending time with those who considered themselves “righteous” and arrogantly thought they didn’t need help. We wanted to know more about the God who inspired Jesus to teach and act in this way.

Then, we heard that Jesus was tortured and hung on a Roman cross just for preaching about a God of love and grace. And we heard that, even from the Cross, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.” We were shocked when we heard this. Who could be so generous-spirited that they would forgive even those who rejected him so viciously? Surely, if Jesus’s God were responsible for growing his heart this large, we wanted to worship this God, too.

That’s when we experienced it. We experienced something like one of your more recent theologians, John Wesley, put it: a “heart strangely warmed.” It was like Jesus was alive within our hearts!

He’s been there ever since.

A little while after this experience, God sent us to Corinth where we met the apostle Paul. Paul was so kind and gracious, and so generous, that we could tell that his heart had been “strangely warmed” by Jesus, too. In fact, Paul’s heart was *on fire*! He wanted nothing more than for this same fire to spread throughout the world.

When we learned that he financed his mission to the world through tent-making, we knew that God had sent us to him for a reason. Aquila and I were tent-makers, too! And frankly, we made better tents than Paul did so we knew we could teach him a thing or two about tent-making. We did, and Paul taught us more about Jesus and the Holy Spirit, which he said was the Spirit of Jesus that warms every heart who accepts him.

Soon, we found ourselves traveling with Paul around the Mediterranean. Once or twice we risked our lives for this kind soul. You see, his preaching about a God of love and grace

angered those in power who were heavily invested in people blaming the gods for their troubles rather than human beings (especially them).

Eventually, we journeyed with Paul to Ephesus, where he made us the leaders of the church he had established there. I'm humbled to say that the community we continued to build in Ephesus became one of the most renowned communities in the Christian world. Many Christian leaders arose from our congregation – leaders like Apollos, who we personally tutored.

Paul was so appreciative of our efforts that Aquila and I are mentioned no less than six times in his letters. Four of those times, Paul mentions me before my husband. A lot of people wonder why Paul would break the common convention by naming me first. Some people wonder if it was because of Paul's belief that men and women are equal and therefore either of us could be mentioned first. Others wonder if it was because I was a more prominent leader than my husband. I'll just leave you all to wonder about that for yourselves.

While you're wondering, I'll finish by offering you a little something that I wonder about: I wonder why so many people in your day still don't realize how many women served as leaders of Christian churches when the New Testament so clearly mentions us? Do they not read their Bibles? Or, do they hope *you* won't read *yours*?

II. Meet Lydia

Hello, I'm another one of those church leaders who many people in your day still don't seem to know existed. Like Priscilla, I was a pagan before converting to "The Way." Only, I wasn't a Roman. I was from Lydia – hence my name. Today, you'd call me *Turkish*.

My home town was Thyatira. You may remember Thyatira from your "Seven Letters to Seven Churches" series on the Book of Revelation. Thyatira was a working-class town, chock full of trade guilds. In fact, there were more trade guilds in Thyatira than any other city in the Mediterranean.

Like modern-day trade guilds or unions, the guilds of Thyatira functioned as organizations that looked after the interests of the artisans and craftspeople of a particular trade. Yet, our guilds did much more. They were kind of a cross between a professional association, a trade union, a cartel, a secret society, and a church.

Of course, the guilds weren't actually churches, but they acted like them in so far as each guild served a particular god or goddess who was thought to be the patron saint of that guild. Our work and our religious life were inseparable. We believed that if you honored the god of your guild in a way that was pleasing, the god would bless you with success – perhaps even make you rich. My family became quite wealthy through our work, so we were extra enthusiastic worshippers of our god.

Part of the reason we were wealthy, however, has more to do with the kind of cloth we manufactured than the god we served. Our fabrics were so soft and finely crafted that they

were often purchased by kings, queens, and other royalty, which is why most of our cloth was dyed purple – the color of royalty.

When I moved to Philippi in Greece, I continued to sell purple cloth there that I imported from my family in Thyatira.

Now, in the Bible, I am the first recorded convert to Christianity on European soil. You may wonder why I would swap the god of my guild, who many thought was responsible for my success, for the God of Jesus.

I'm glad you asked!

One day, the apostle Paul and a couple of his companions came to town. One of his companions was named Luke – the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. I met Luke down by the river where I had gone to pray. He asked me who I was praying to. I told him I was praying to the god of my guild.

Then I stretched out my hands and prayed, “O god, you know how devoted to you I am. You know how I offer you sacrifices day and night. In return for my humble devotion I ask that you bless me with abundant sales in the marketplace. I ask that you continue to prosper me and my family each day. I ask that you prosper us until we are the wealthiest, most successful merchants of purple cloth in all of Greece and Lydia. Through our success your glory will be made known not only to us but to the world. Amen.”

After I finished praying to my god, Luke began to pray to his:

“Our Father,” he prayed, “who is in heaven. Hallowed be your name. May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. I ask for nothing but my bread for the day, and for forgiveness of my sins to the extent that I forgive the sins of others. Do not let me be tempted by any greed or undue reward, but deliver me from evil. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”

Our prayers could not have been more different. I had prayed that *my* will be done. He prayed for *his God's* will to be done. I had prayed for the increase and prosperity of my realm. He prayed for the increase of *God's* Realm. I had prayed for wealth and success. He asked nothing for himself but his bread for the day, for strength to avoid the day's temptations, and for forgiveness.

I was dumbfounded. “Who is this God you are praying to?” I asked. He told me he prayed to the God of Jesus, who was crucified and whom God raised from the dead.

“This Jesus and his God must be pretty powerful if he was raised from the dead!” I said.

“Yes, my God created the Universe,” said Luke.

“If your God created everything,” I said, “then why do you refer to your God as ‘Father’ – like God is your parent?”

“God is my True Parent,” said Luke, “and yours, too.”

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. If his God was so powerful, and was also his True Parent, then he could have asked for all the wealth and power he ever could have wanted – and then some. But the only benefit he asked for was enough bread for the day. The rest of his prayer was about *God’s* benefit, and that of others.

Luke and I continued to talk about Jesus and his God until I finally asked him, “Can you give me something?”

“I’ll give you whatever I can,” he responded.

I said, “If it is possible, I would like you to give me a heart like yours. For I, who am among the wealthiest people in Philippi, asked my god for even more wealth, while you, who have far less, asked for little but the benefit of others. If I had a heart like yours, I would probably have less money, but I would be the richest woman in Philippi.”

Luke told me that he couldn’t give me his heart, but that Jesus could give me *his* heart. He said this is all it really takes to have Jesus’s heart – to earnestly want it.

So I asked. I asked with all *my* heart to receive *Jesus’s* heart. Suddenly, I felt a strange warming in my heart. The warmer it got, the more it seemed to grow.

From that time on, I opened my house to Luke, Paul, their companions, and anyone else who wanted a heart like Jesus. Eventually, my house became the first Christian church in Philippi.

When Paul and Luke eventually left Philippi, I asked them if I should remain in my profession as a merchant of purple cloth or devote myself to the Christian ministry.

Both of them insisted that I could – and should – do both. They told me to simply treat the recipients of my professional labors with the same respect and generosity I would offer Jesus himself if he were a customer, and to teach others to do the same thing. They promised that if I would do these things, there would be not just one minister of “The Way” in Philippi – me – but as many ministers as my house could hold.

This is exactly what I did. Soon, we had all kinds of people treating the recipients of their labor as if they were Jesus himself. This brought more and more people into my house to learn how to receive the heart of Jesus.

If you want to know how it all turned out, just read Paul’s letter to my church in Philippi – you know, the “Epistle to the Philippians.” There you’ll find that treating others like you would treat Jesus not only grows your soul, but it grows your church. And it grows the best kind of church there is.