
Church History

The Colour Purple: Malaria, Snails and the Kingdom

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In 1856, English Chemistry student William Henry Perkin was looking for a cure for malaria. Instead, he stumbled on a way to make an artificial purple dye from coal tar.

In so doing, he literally changed history, for his discovery led to advances in medicine, photography, perfumery, food production, and revolutionized the fashion industry.

Making ancient Tyrian Purple

Purple has for many years been valued as a colour, because to create it was very difficult. According to the Roman scientist Pliny the Elder, the best purple dye was manufactured at the Phoenician city of Tyre (see 2 Chronicles 2:7).

The raw material out of which this dye was manufactured was obtained from the glandular secretion of a carnivorous sea snail. It took around 12,000 of these snails to produce a mere 0.05 of an ounce of dye.

Tyrian purple, as it was known, was literally worth more than its weight in gold and purple-dyed fabrics commanded exorbitant prices. As Pliny noted of ancient fashion, "it adds radiance to every garment," and this led to what he called a "frantic passion for purple" among the upper and middle classes of his world.

The Old Testament world had also been shaped by this passion for purple, where it was associated with royalty, prestige and power (see Proverbs 31:22; Song of Solomon 3:9-10, 7:5; Daniel 5:7; Esther 8:15).

The Christian seller of purple

When the apostle Paul came to the city of Philippi, he met a woman named Lydia, who was originally from the city of Thyatira (in modern-day Turkey).

Ethnically she was Greek, but she had come to believe that the Jewish Old Testament contained the truth about God and the world, and thus she

regularly met with a number of sincere Jewish women to pray and worship (Acts 16:14-15).

We are also told by Luke that she was “a seller of purple” (verse 14), which meant that she either sold the dye, or, more likely, sold purple-dyed clothing.

She would have been a woman of great wealth. Her regeneration by the Holy Spirit—“the Lord opened her heart” (verse 14)—led to her baptism, and she opened her home as a base of mission in the city of Philippi.

When Paul went with the Gospel to a new city, a key part of his mission strategy was to find a place where the churches could meet for distinctively Christian worship and fellowship.

So it was that in Philippi, the Lord used the wealth that Lydia had obtained by the selling of purple clothing, to serve Paul’s preaching about the Lord Christ.

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