

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: The Gospel Comes to Europe: Conversions at Philippi

Acts 16:6–34

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson follows the gospel as it crosses into Europe at Philippi, around A.D. 49 to 50, on Paul's second missionary journey. The historical setting is rich. After the Holy Spirit redirected Paul away from Asia and Bithynia, a vision of a Macedonian man drew the mission across the sea. At Philippi, Luke records three strikingly different conversions: Lydia, a wealthy God-fearing businesswoman whose heart the Lord opened; a slave girl delivered from a spirit of divination; and a Roman jailer who came to faith in the middle of a violent night. Together these accounts show the gospel reaching every kind of person, rich and poor, free and enslaved, religious and pagan.

This lesson is doctrinally sensitive because of the jailer's famous exchange. His question, "What must I do to be saved?" and Paul's answer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved," are frequently quoted to support salvation by 'faith only.' The teacher's task is to present the whole account, not a single sentence. Paul did not stop at "believe"; he "spoke the word of the Lord" to the jailer, and the man was baptized that very hour, just as in every conversion in Acts. 'Believe and be saved' is biblical shorthand for the obedient faith that hears the word, repents, confesses Christ, and is baptized. Lydia's conversion teaches the same pattern: the Lord opened her heart through the word, and she responded in baptism. Present this clearly and kindly, refuting the 'faith only' reading without turning the lesson into a mere argument.

This lesson also aims at the heart. Press the jailer's question on every student: have you settled it for yourself, and have you responded as the New Testament directs? Hold up Lydia's attentive, responsive heart as a model, and Paul and Silas singing in chains as a picture of gospel joy that suffering cannot silence. Help students grow in trusting God's redirection of their plans, in responding to His word without delay, and in helping their own households come to faith. Send them home rejoicing, like the jailer, in a salvation that changes everything in a single night.

Question 1

Student Question:

When Paul was forbidden to preach in Asia and then in Bithynia, God redirected him through a vision to Macedonia, and the gospel crossed into Europe (Acts 16:6–10). What does this account teach about how God directs and advances His mission, even through closed doors and changed plans?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice that the closed doors were God's doing. The Spirit forbade Asia; the Spirit of Jesus did not allow Bithynia. What looked like obstruction was actually direction. God was not hindering the gospel; He was steering it toward a continent that would shape the history of the faith. The closed door and the open vision were both expressions of one sovereign purpose.

Teach that God directs His mission according to His own wisdom and timing, often in ways that surprise and even frustrate His servants. Paul was a willing, strategic missionary, yet he could not see what God saw. He had to be led, step by step, sometimes by a no before the yes. This calls for trust and responsiveness rather than rigid attachment to our own plans.

Observe Paul's readiness to obey. Once the vision came, "immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us" (Acts 16:10). The closed doors did not make Paul sulk or quit; they made him watchful for God's leading, and when it came, he moved at once. That combination of patience under closed doors and readiness when they open is worth imitating.

Apply it to providence in mission and in life. God is sovereignly working out the spread of His gospel, and our part is to remain available, attentive, and obedient, trusting that even our disappointments may be His redirection toward something greater.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God sovereignly directs and advances His mission (Proverbs 16:9)
- Closed doors can be God's guidance, not merely obstruction
- Trust and responsiveness over rigid attachment to our own plans
- Readiness to obey promptly when God's direction becomes clear

Discussion Prompts

- How were the closed doors actually part of God's direction?
- What does Paul's response to redirection teach us?
- How do we stay available and attentive to God's leading?

Question 2

Student Question:

God's redirection of Paul's plans turned out to be far better than Paul's own. Where in your life have you been frustrated by closed doors, only to find God leading you somewhere better? How can you grow in trusting His direction when your plans are interrupted?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question invites students to read their own lives the way Luke reads Paul's journey. Many can look back and see that a painful closed door, a lost job, a move, a

relationship that ended, became the doorway to something they now treasure. Recognizing this builds trust for the closed doors they face now.

Help students with the harder part: trusting God in the middle, before the redirection makes sense. Paul did not know why Asia and Bithynia were closed until the vision came. We rarely get the explanation in advance. Faith means trusting the Director even when we cannot yet see the plot.

Move toward present trust. Invite each student to name one current 'closed door' that frustrates them, and to consciously entrust it to God, asking Him to lead and choosing to stay available to His direction rather than forcing their own way.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Recognizing God's good hand in past redirections
- Trusting God's wisdom before the reason is clear
- Holding our plans loosely and God's leading firmly
- Faith that remains available rather than forcing its own way

Discussion Prompts

- When has a closed door led you somewhere better?
- What current interruption do you need to entrust to God?
- How can you trust His direction before you understand it?

Question 3

Student Question:

As Lydia listened to Paul, "the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said," and she responded by being baptized (Acts 16:14–15). What does this teach about how God works through His word to bring people to faith, and about the response He calls for, without making us mere passive objects who cannot answer?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Lydia's conversion beautifully joins God's work and human response. The Lord opened her heart, this was God's gracious initiative, but notice what He opened it to do: "to pay attention to what was said." God worked through the preached word, not apart from it. He did not bypass her mind or her hearing; He opened her to receive the message Paul was speaking.

Guard against a misreading here. 'The Lord opened her heart' does not teach that God irresistibly regenerated her against or apart from her will, as in the Calvinist scheme. It teaches that God, through His word and providence, drew her and made her receptive, and she

genuinely responded, listening, believing, and being baptized. Divine grace and human response work together; grace enables and invites, and Lydia answered.

Highlight the means: the word. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Romans 10:17). God opens hearts through the message about Jesus. This is why preaching, teaching, and reading the Scriptures matter so much; they are the instrument God uses to open hearts like Lydia's and like ours.

Note her response: she was baptized, she and her household, and she pressed her hospitality on the missionaries. An opened heart does not stay passive; it obeys and overflows. Lydia models the receptive, responsive faith God looks for: attentive to the word, prompt to obey, glad to serve.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God works through His word to open hearts and create faith (Romans 10:17)
- Grace enables and invites; the sinner genuinely responds
- A guard against irresistible grace that bypasses human response
- An opened heart obeys promptly (baptism) and overflows in service

Discussion Prompts

- How did God use the word in Lydia's conversion?
- How do divine grace and human response work together here?
- What marks of a truly opened heart do you see in Lydia?

Question 4

Student Question:

Lydia listened attentively, and her open heart led to immediate obedience. How attentive is your own heart to God's word when it is taught? Is there a place where you have heard the word clearly but have been slow to respond? What would obedience look like there?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns Lydia's example into self-examination. We can sit under the word for years with half-open hearts, hearing without truly listening, agreeing without responding. Lydia 'paid attention,' and her attention led to action. Help students assess the quality of their own listening.

Name the gap between hearing and doing. James warns against being "hearers only," who deceive themselves (James 1:22). Many of us know far more than we obey. The issue is rarely a lack of information; it is a delay in response. Ask students to identify one clear word from God they have been slow to act on.

Move toward obedience. Encourage each student to name the specific next step a truly attentive heart would take, a conversation, a confession, a change of habit, an act of obedience already known but postponed, and to take it this week. Attentiveness proves itself in action.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between hearing the word and truly heeding it (James 1:22)
- Attentiveness to the word as a mark of a responsive heart
- The danger of knowing more than we obey
- Prompt obedience as the proof of genuine attention

Discussion Prompts

- How attentive is your heart when the word is taught?
- What clear word have you been slow to obey?
- What is the next step an attentive heart would take?

Question 5

Student Question:

When the jailer fell trembling before Paul and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30), he asked the right question in the right way. Why is the very form of his question significant, and what does it reveal about salvation as something a person must respond to, not merely feel or assume?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The jailer’s question is one of the most important in all of Scripture, and its very wording is instructive. He does not ask, ‘What must I feel?’ or ‘How can I be sure I am already accepted?’ He asks, “What must I do to be saved?” He assumes, rightly, that salvation calls for a response, that there is something he must do in answer to the God who has confronted him.

This matches the pattern across Acts. At Pentecost, the convicted crowd cried, “Brothers, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). Saul on the road asked, “What shall I do, Lord?” (Acts 22:10). The right response to conviction is not passivity but the question of obedience: what does God require of me now? Salvation is a gift, but it is a gift to be received on God’s terms, and the awakened sinner instinctively asks for those terms.

Be careful to keep grace central. The jailer’s ‘doing’ is not earning; it is responding. He is not asking how to merit salvation but how to lay hold of the salvation now being offered to him through Christ. The question honors both the freeness of the gift and the reality of the response God calls for.

Apply it to the student. Have they asked, and answered, this question for themselves? And do they treat salvation as something that calls for a definite response, or have they assumed it vaguely without ever responding as Scripture directs? The jailer's urgency is a model worth imitating.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation calls for a response, not mere feeling or assumption
- The consistent pattern of the awakened asking 'what shall I do?' (Acts 2:37; 22:10)
- Receiving a free gift on God's terms is not earning it
- The urgency and seriousness with which salvation should be sought

Discussion Prompts

- Why is the form of the jailer's question significant?
- How does his question fit the pattern of others in Acts?
- Have you asked and answered this question for yourself?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul and Silas, beaten and chained at midnight, were "praying and singing hymns to God" (Acts 16:25). Where in your life is it hardest to worship, in pain, disappointment, or injustice? What would it look like for you to sing to God in your own midnight, and where does that kind of joy come from?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question lets students sit with one of the most arresting images in Acts: two men, unjustly beaten and chained, singing to God at midnight. Their joy was not based on circumstances, which were dreadful, but on God Himself. Help students see that Christian joy runs on a deeper current than comfort.

Explore where worship is hardest. For each person there is a particular midnight, chronic pain, a betrayal, a grief, an injustice, where praise does not come naturally. Naming that place honestly is not faithlessness; it is the first step toward learning to worship there as Paul and Silas did.

Point to the source of such joy. It flows from a settled confidence that God is good, present, and sovereign even in the dark, and from a salvation that no chain can touch. Encourage each student to choose one 'midnight' and to bring it to God in worship this week, even through tears, trusting that the same God who shook the prison is with them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christian joy grounded in God rather than circumstances (Philippians 4:11–13)

- Worship as an act of faith in the midst of suffering
- The presence and sovereignty of God in our darkest hours
- A salvation and hope no hardship can take away

Discussion Prompts

- Where is it hardest for you to worship?
- What would singing to God in your midnight look like?
- Where does joy that survives suffering actually come from?

Question 7

Student Question:

To the jailer's question, Paul answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31), but the account continues: they "spoke the word of the Lord to him," and he "was baptized at once, he and all his family," that very hour (Acts 16:32–33). Why is it important to read the whole account, and what does the jailer's immediate baptism show about what believing in the Lord Jesus actually involved?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question prepares the ground for the heaviest block at Question 9, so lay the timeline out plainly. Paul's first word to the jailer was indeed "believe." But the verse does not end the story. Luke tells us Paul and Silas then "spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house." Belief had to have content; the jailer had to hear the gospel before he could intelligently believe it.

Then watch what believing led to. That same hour of the night, still bloody from the beating he had to wash, the jailer "was baptized at once, he and all his family." He did not wait. The faith Paul preached was a faith that immediately obeyed in baptism, exactly as in every other conversion in Acts. 'Believe and be saved' was never meant to exclude what believing actually produced.

Draw the lesson about reading Scripture. We must not build a doctrine on a single clause torn from its context. The full account interprets the summary statement. When Paul said 'believe,' he meant the kind of believing that hears the word, turns to Christ, and is baptized, because that is exactly what the jailer did within the hour.

Affirm the wholeness of the response. The jailer believed, was baptized, and 'rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.' Faith, obedience, and joy belong together. Reading the whole account keeps us from amputating obedience from faith or joy from obedience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The whole account interprets the single summary statement
- ‘Believe’ required hearing the word of the Lord first (Romans 10:17)
- Genuine belief led immediately to baptism, as throughout Acts
- Faith, baptism, and joy held together in one conversion

Discussion Prompts

- Why must we read the whole account, not just one verse?
- What did believing lead the jailer to do that very hour?
- How does the full story define what ‘believe’ meant here?

Question 8

Student Question:

The jailer did not wait until morning; he was baptized “at once,” that very hour of the night (Acts 16:33). When you understand what God asks of you, do you respond with that kind of urgency, or do you tend to delay? Where might delay be keeping you, or someone you love, from full obedience to Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The jailer’s urgency is striking and convicting. He had every reason to wait until morning, the hour was late, he was shaken, his wounds and his prisoners needed attention, yet he was baptized at once. When the gospel grips a heart, delay feels intolerable. Ananias had asked Saul the same pointed question: “Why do you wait?” (Acts 22:16).

Help students examine their own patterns of delay. We often know what God asks long before we do it, postponing baptism, a reconciliation, a confession, a change, telling ourselves we will get to it later. Delay can quietly harden into permanent neglect. The jailer models the opposite: immediate, glad obedience.

Move toward urgency in a specific area. Ask each student to name one act of obedience they have been postponing, for themselves or in helping a loved one, and to take a concrete step toward it this week. The right response to a clear command from God is not someday but now.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Prompt obedience as the fitting response to the gospel (Acts 22:16)
- The danger of delay hardening into neglect
- Urgency in our own obedience and in helping others obey
- The joy that follows obeying without delay

Discussion Prompts

- Do you respond to God with urgency or with delay?

- What obedience have you been postponing?
- What step could you take this week without waiting?

Question 9

Student Question:

The single sentence “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31) is often quoted to teach that a person is saved by faith only, apart from repentance, confession, and baptism. Yet in this very account, belief led the jailer to hear the word, wash the apostles’ wounds, and be baptized that same hour. How does the whole conversion at Philippi show that “believe and be saved” is shorthand for an obedient faith, and how would you lovingly answer someone who uses this verse to set faith against baptism?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, and it deserves the fullest, most careful treatment. Begin by acknowledging honestly why people quote this verse. Taken alone, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” can sound like belief is the only thing required. The kind and effective response is not to dismiss the verse but to read it in its own context, which settles the matter.

Walk through the account as the interpreter of the sentence. Paul said “believe,” and then immediately “spoke the word of the Lord to him,” because saving belief must have the gospel as its content. Having heard, the jailer was baptized “at once,” that very hour, before he ever went to bed. Luke, who wrote this sentence, also wrote the next two verses. He clearly did not understand “believe and be saved” to exclude baptism, since he records the baptism as the immediate result of that believing.

Show that this is the unbroken pattern of Acts. Every conversion in the book joins faith with baptism: the Pentecost crowd (Acts 2:38), the Samaritans (Acts 8:12), the Ethiopian (Acts 8:36–38), Saul (Acts 22:16), Lydia in this very chapter (Acts 16:15), and Cornelius (Acts 10:48). ‘Believe and be saved’ is biblical shorthand, the same way we might tell someone ‘trust the doctor and you’ll get well,’ meaning they will also take the medicine and follow the treatment. Faith is named because it is the heart of the response, but it is never the bare, inactive faith that stops short of obeying.

Explain the relationship of faith and baptism rightly. Baptism is not a work by which we earn salvation, nor a substitute for faith; it is the appointed expression of faith, the moment a believing, repentant sinner is united with Christ and receives the forgiveness His blood provides (Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27; 1 Peter 3:21). To set faith against baptism is to divide what God has joined. The jailer’s faith and the jailer’s baptism were not two competing things; they were one obedient response to the gospel.

Equip the student to answer in love. Suggest that, rather than arguing, they simply read the next two verses aloud and ask, ‘What did believing lead this man to do, that very hour?’ The text answers the objection on its own. The aim is not to win a debate but to help people see the beautiful wholeness of the gospel response: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized into Christ, and then rejoicing, as the jailer did, in a salvation received exactly as God designed it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The context of Acts 16:31 includes hearing the word and immediate baptism (16:32–33)
- ‘Believe and be saved’ as shorthand for an obedient faith, not bare assent
- The unbroken pattern of faith and baptism in every conversion in Acts
- Baptism as the appointed expression of faith, not a meritorious work (Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27)
- Faith and baptism are one response to the gospel, not competitors
- Answering the ‘faith only’ reading by letting the whole account speak

Discussion Prompts

- How do the next two verses interpret ‘believe and be saved’?
- How does the pattern of Acts confirm this reading?
- How would you lovingly answer someone who sets faith against baptism?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the three conversions at Philippi, Lydia with her opened heart, the slave girl set free, and the jailer rejoicing with his household. Name one specific way you sense Jesus using these accounts to form you, whether to trust His leading, to soften your heart to His word, or to settle and live out the answer to “what must I do to be saved?”

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson’s threads: God’s sovereign direction of the mission, the opening of hearts through the word, the freedom Christ brings, and the obedient, joyful faith that saves. Ask students to name one concrete way the Lord has met them rather than offering a general reflection.

Offer the three doors. Some need to trust God’s leading and redirection in their lives. Some need to soften and sharpen their attention to His word, like Lydia. Some need to settle, or to help someone else settle, the jailer’s question, responding to Christ exactly as Scripture directs and living in the joy that follows.

Close with the joy of Philippi. In a single night a despairing man became a rejoicing believer with his whole household. The gospel that crossed into Europe is the same gospel that has reached your students. Send them home trusting the God who leads, attentive to His word, and rejoicing in a salvation received on His terms.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Trusting God's sovereign leading in our lives
- Attentive, responsive hearing of the word
- Settling and living out the answer to 'what must I do to be saved?'
- The joy of a salvation received exactly as God designed

Discussion Prompts

- Which of the three conversions speaks most to you, and why?
- What is one step Christ is forming you to take?
- How does the joy of the jailer encourage you this week?