

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher

Lesson 6: The Gospel Comes to Europe: Conversions at Philippi -- Acts 16:6–34

Paul had a plan, and God kept closing the doors. He tried to preach in Asia, and the Holy Spirit would not allow it. He tried to go into Bithynia, and again the door shut. It must have been bewildering, a missionary forbidden to do mission. Then one night in Troas, on the edge of the sea, Paul saw a vision: a man of Macedonia, standing and pleading, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” And just like that, the redirection made sense. God was not hindering the gospel; He was steering it. The next morning they set sail for Europe, and the good news of Jesus crossed into a new continent.

In Philippi the gospel took root in the most unlikely soil and in the most unlikely people. First there was Lydia, a successful businesswoman, a seller of purple goods, who had gathered with other women by the river to pray. As she listened to Paul, “the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said,” and she and her household were baptized. Then there was a slave girl, exploited by her owners for the fortune-telling spirit that possessed her, whom Paul set free in the name of Jesus Christ, an act of mercy that cost him dearly.

For freeing the girl, Paul and Silas were seized, stripped, beaten with rods, and thrown into the inner prison with their feet in stocks. And there, at midnight, bloodied and chained, they did the most surprising thing of all: “Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.” Then the ground shook. An earthquake threw the prison doors open and unfastened every chain. The jailer, certain his prisoners had fled and that his life was forfeit, drew his sword to kill himself, until Paul cried out in the dark, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.”

Trembling, the jailer fell down before Paul and Silas and asked the most important question a human being can ask: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Their answer has echoed through the centuries: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” But the story does not stop at that sentence, and we must not stop there either. They “spoke the word of the Lord to him,” and that very hour of the night he washed their wounds and “was baptized at once, he and all his family.” Then he set food before them and rejoiced that he had believed in God. This lesson follows the gospel into Europe and looks closely at how three very different people came to be saved.

Group Discussion: In a single night the Philippian jailer went from drawing his sword in despair to rejoicing with his whole household (Acts 16:27–34). What does the speed and completeness of his transformation tell you about the power of the gospel to change a life? Have you witnessed a change like that?

Personal Reflection: The jailer cried out, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). It is the most important question anyone can ask. Have you settled that question for yourself, responding to Christ as the New Testament directs? And how readily do you help others, even those in your own household, come to ask it?

Read Acts 16:6–34

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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?"

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Acts 2:37–41, the Pentecost crowd asking "what shall we do?" and being told to repent and be baptized; Romans 10:9–17, confessing, believing, and calling on the Lord, with faith coming by hearing the word; Mark 16:15–16, "whoever believes and is baptized will be saved"; Acts 8:35–39, the Ethiopian who heard the good news of Jesus and was baptized at once; 1 Thessalonians 1:5–6, receiving the word with joy in the midst of affliction