



## Three Stories

Acts 16

Lake Arrowhead Church, Waleska, Georgia  
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## THREE STORIES

### Acts 16

Paul David Hewson was born in 1960 and known today as Bono, the lead singer of the Irish rock band U2. Bono and U2 have sold over 150 million albums, won 22 Grammy Awards, and been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Bono is known as both a poet and a rebel, known for his passionate and gritty lyrics, and respected for drawing attention to justice issues around the world.

Michael Franzese is the son of mafia boss Sonny Franzese. He grew up around the mafia and took the oath at the age of 24, joining the Colombo crime family. In the 1980s, *Fortune* magazine listed him as number 18 of the 50 wealthiest and most powerful mobsters in America. His racketeering schemes earned \$10 million a week for the mob. He associated with famous mobsters Carmine Persico and John Gotti. Under constant investigation and indicted several times, Franzese was finally convicted in 1991 and sent into solitary confinement.

Phil Robertson was the patriarch of the family reality show *Duck Dynasty*. Phil grew up in North Louisiana in a home with no electricity, no toilet, and no bathtub. The family could not afford groceries and relied on what they grew in the garden and hunted in the woods. Phil became a college football star but loved duck hunting more. He also loved drinking, which led to years of turmoil in his marriage and family.

What do a rock star, a mobster, and a redneck have in common?<sup>1</sup> Take a look. **[VIDEO]**

Again, what do a rock star, a mobster, and a redneck have in common? The same thing all of us have in common. ***Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord!***

The book of Acts is filled with dramatic events and incredible stories of faith. Acts 16 records three of those stories. Stories about three very different people who came to have one thing in common – Jesus. These stories in Acts 16 teach us that whether someone is rich or poor, has deep intellectual questions or painful wounds, has a dark, immoral past or lives a good, moral life, the need is the same. The answer to all our questions and the solution to all our problems is the same. ***Everyone needs Jesus.***

## GOD WAS MOVING

Let me share how God was moving in the months leading up to Acts 16.

In Jerusalem, persecution intensified when King Herod arrested James and publicly executed him by the sword.<sup>2</sup> First, John the Baptist was beheaded, then Stephen was stoned, and now James. They were the first three of a long line of martyrs throughout Christian history.

Peter was also arrested and to be executed.<sup>3</sup> But the church prayed for him, and an angel came into his cell.<sup>4</sup> The chains fell off his hands and his feet, and the angel led him out of the prison.<sup>5</sup> When Herod found that Peter had escaped, he was so infuriated that he had the guards

executed instead.<sup>6</sup> Days later, Herod stood before the people wearing a robe made entirely of silver.<sup>7</sup> As the sun reflected off the robe it made him look supernatural. As he spoke, “The people gave him a great ovation, shouting, ‘It’s the voice of a god, not of a man!’” (Acts 12:22, NLT). Then the Bible says, “Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died” (Acts 12:23, NAS).

Yet Luke, the author of Acts, inserts this sentence. “But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied” (Acts 12:24, NAS).

In spite of opposition, the church in Jerusalem grew in confidence. So much so, they sent Paul and Barnabas out as the first missionaries.<sup>8</sup> On that first missionary journey they traveled from Jerusalem to Cyprus to Salamis to Paphos to Perga to Iconium to Lycaonia to Lystra to Derbe and to Antioch.<sup>9</sup>

Along the way Paul and Barnabas confronted the false prophet Bar-Jesus and the magician Elymas.<sup>10</sup> To counter these false teachers, Paul boldly preached the Gospel, tracing the history of Israel all the way to the death and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>11</sup> When he finished, the crowd begged to hear more. The next day, “the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord ... And the word of the Lord spread throughout the whole region” (Acts 13:44, 49, ESV).

But opposition persisted and Paul and Barnabas were driven from one city to the next. Yet, in each place, they preached the Gospel boldly.<sup>12</sup> But in Lystra, religious and civil leaders provoked a mob that “stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead” (Acts 14:19, NIV). Yet he survived. And Paul and Barnabas returned to Jerusalem to report all that happened.

And what happened on that first missionary journey? The Gospel was preached with boldness. Opposition intensified in every city. And everywhere they went, people believed in Jesus.

This brings us to Acts 16, about 16 years after the resurrection, when the church at Jerusalem sent Paul and Silas on the second missionary journey. Acts 16 records what happened at Philippi. It records three stories, stories about three very different people.

### **A BUSINESSWOMAN**

Luke was a companion of Paul and Silas, Timothy also. And Luke wrote the book of Acts and includes himself in these stories when we read the words “we” and “us.” He was there, and he records what happened.

The first story is about a woman named Lydia.

“We reached Philippi, a major city of Macedonia and a Roman colony. And we stayed there several days. On the Sabbath we went a little way outside the city to a riverbank, where we thought people would be meeting for prayer, and we sat down to speak with some women who had gathered there” (Acts 16:12-13, NLT).

Philippi was a colony for retired Roman soldiers. It was also rich in gold, silver, and copper. So it was a wealthy city. There was no Jewish population and there was no synagogue in Philippi. Yet there were some women who worshiped God and gathered at the river to pray. Paul and Silas heard of these women and went to the river to meet them.

“One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a merchant of expensive purple cloth, who worshiped God” (Acts 16:14, NLT). Lydia was a successful, wealthy businesswoman. She traveled from across the Aegean Sea. Thyatira was home to a trade guild of dyers. It was famous for purple dye made from shellfish and used to make expensive purple cloth. Since Philippi was a wealthy city, it was a good place for Lydia to visit and sell her expensive fabrics. Lydia also “worshiped God.” She was not a Jew or a Christian. But she believed in God.

As Paul spoke, “She listened and the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying” (Acts 16:14, NLT). That day she was convinced that Jesus was the Son of God. And Lydia “and her household were baptized, and she asked us to be her guests. ‘If you agree that I am a true believer in the Lord,’ she said, ‘come and stay at my home.’ And she urged us until we agreed” (Acts 16:15, NLT). Lydia’s home became the first church in Philippi.

### **A SLAVE GIRL**

The second story is about a slave girl.

Paul and Silas, along with Luke and Timothy, “met a slave girl who had a spirit (of divination) that enabled her to tell the future. She earned a lot of money for her masters by telling fortunes” (Acts 16:16, NLT).<sup>13</sup>

She was a slave. Perhaps sold by her parents to settle a debt or kidnapped from her family. She had no rights and no freedom. She was used and abused. Owned by wicked men using her to make a profit. And she was possessed by “a spirit of divination,” also called the spirit of Python. In Greek mythology, Python was a spirit in the form of a snake and worshiped by ancient Greeks. The girl’s masters were most likely worshipers of Python. Being possessed by the spirit of Python the girl was able to “tell the future.”

She stalked Paul and the disciples, shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved” (Acts 16:17, NLT). Far from a compliment, she was taunting them and mocking them. Imagine the demonic shriek of her voice. An evil spirit in her saying, “Listen to these fools who claim to know the way of salvation.”

“This went on day after day until Paul got so exasperated that he turned and said to the demon within her, ‘I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And instantly it left her” (Acts 16:18, NLT). Greatly annoyed, Paul exorcised the demon! This proved the power of God over Satan and his demonic forces. And her deliverance suggests her salvation.

“Her masters’ hopes of wealth were now shattered, so they grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them before the authorities at the marketplace. ‘The whole city is in an uproar because of these Jews!’ they shouted to the city officials. ‘They are teaching customs that are illegal for us

Romans to practice.’ A mob quickly formed against Paul and Silas, and the city officials ordered them stripped and beaten with wooden rods. They were severely beaten, and then they were thrown into prison. The jailer was ordered to make sure they didn’t escape” (Acts 16:19-23, NLT).<sup>14</sup>

“Stripped ... beaten with wooden rods ... severely beaten ... and thrown into prison.” All for the Gospel.

Paul would later recount his suffering in a letter to the Corinthians, in which he said, “I’ve been in prison so many times, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea ... I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have endured many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm” (2 Corinthians 11:23-27, NLT). All for the sake of the Gospel.

### **A ROMAN SOLDIER**

The third story is about a Roman soldier, the Philippian jailer.

“So the jailer put them into the inner dungeon and clamped their feet in the stocks. Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening” (Acts 16:24-25, NLT).

“Praying and singing!” “Not groans, but songs,” writes John Stott. “Instead of cursing God, they blessed God.”<sup>15</sup> Would you do that? If the worst happened, would you pray and sing? We need to think about that, because at some point, the worst is going to happen. An illness, a death, something that breaks your heart. Not if, but when the worst happens, will you blame God or will you pray and sing?

“Suddenly, there was a massive earthquake, and the prison was shaken to its foundations. All the doors immediately flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off! The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself” (Acts 16:26-27, NLT). The jailer panicked, because if a guard allowed his prisoners to escape, he would be put to death. This happened in Acts 12 when Peter escaped. Herod had the guards executed.

But none of the prisoners escaped. They were all still there. So Paul shouted to the jailer, “Stop! Don’t kill yourself! We are all here!” (Acts 16:28, NLT).

“The jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’” (Acts 16:29-30, NLT).

That's the question the whole world should be asking. In Acts 2, when Peter preached the first sermon of the church, and declared that Jesus was crucified and yet rose the dead proving to be the Son of God, the people "were pierced to the heart" and cried out, "What shall we do?"<sup>16</sup> The jailer was asking the same question. "What must I do to be saved?" And that's the question every person should be asking.

And the answer? "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household" (Acts 16:31, NLT). Jesus is the answer.

- Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16, NIV).
- He said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6, NIV).<sup>17</sup>
- Peter declared, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name by which we can be saved" (Acts 4:12, NAS).
- John said, "This is the Gospel. God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life, he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:11-12, NIV).

Acts 16 continues, "They shared the word of the Lord with him and with all who lived in his household. Even at that hour of the night, the jailer cared for them and washed their wounds. Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. He brought them into his house and set a meal before them" (Acts 16:32-34, NLT). I love this scene. "And his entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God" (Acts 16:34, NLT). Jesus had come into his life and Jesus had come into his family.

If Lydia were here this morning, she would say, "I was successful in business, and my life was better than for most women in my day. I believed God was real, but I had never heard of Jesus. Until that day by the river, when Paul told me. As I listened, my heart was moved. Jesus, the Son of God. Crucified for me. Rose from the dead. It was all true and I believed. That day changed my life forever."

If the slave girl were here this morning, she would say, "I was a slave. Forgotten by my family. My masters were cruel. I was used and abused every day of my life. Even worse, an evil spirit possessed me. I lived in constant torment and misery. Until that day Paul came along. God set me free! The name of Jesus set me free!"

If the Philippian jailer were here this morning, he would say, "I was a proud soldier. I served Caesar and proved myself in many battles. But my job was watching over a dirty prison, guarding the worst of the worst. And yes, I participated in torture and execution. I loathed my life, but I followed orders. Until the night of the earthquake. I knew the prisoners would escape and I would be held accountable. So I lifted my knife ready to kill myself, but Paul stopped me. And that night, in a candle-lit prison, Paul told me about Jesus. And I begged him to tell me what I had to do to be saved. I was ready to do anything. And Paul said all I had to do was believe in Jesus. It was that simple. And that night, my life was changed and my entire family was saved."

## LESSONS FROM ACTS 16

What are we to learn from these stories in Acts 16?

**1** – Acts 16 teaches us that *the Gospel is for everyone*. Three very different people, yet one answer. Jesus. What do a rock star, a mobster, and a redneck have in common? What do a woman, a slave, and a jailer have in common? Jesus.

One Hebrew morning prayer said, “God, thank You that You have not made me a woman, a slave, or a Gentile.”<sup>18</sup> Ironically, the first three converts in Philippi were a woman, a slave, and a Gentile. Why did Luke include these three people and these three stories? To show that the Gospel is for everyone. Paul later confirmed this when he wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28, NIV). “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26, NIV). Acts 16 teaches us that the Gospel is for everyone.

**2** – A second lesson is that *God opens doors, breaks chains, overcomes circumstances, and makes a way for the Gospel*. So we pray for open doors.<sup>19</sup> We pray for chains to be broken in the life of those we love. And we look for those opportunities that God places in your way.

**3** – These three stories also remind us that *God was moving in hearts then and He moves in the hearts today*. So we pray for those we know and love who do not know Jesus. We pray for Him to move in their hearts. We pray that He would convince them (in their minds) and that He would convict them (in their hearts). We pray for those we know and love and ask God to open their eyes and pierce their hearts and lead them to trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior.

**4** – Acts 16 warns us that *there will always be some degree of opposition or resistance*. Some may oppose you, ridicule you, or shun you. Others may resist the Gospel. Expect some degree of opposition or resistance. But persevere. Keep praying for God to move in their heart. Keep praying for those you know and love who do not know Jesus Christ.

**5** – And finally, *thank God for your story and tell your story*. Thank God for your story. Thank God for sacrificing His Son for you. Thank Jesus for dying for you. Thank God for loving you and forgiving you and saving you. And tell your story. Tell people what Jesus has done for you and why you love Him so much. Thank God for your story and tell your story.

## CONCLUSION

Years later, in a letter to the Philippians, Paul reminisced about his friends at Philippi. In his letter, he wrote, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you ... I hold you in my heart ... I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ” (Philippians 1:3, 1:7, 1:8).

Paul remembered Lydia, as she listened and the Lord opened her heart. He remembered that poor slave girl, set free from her demons. And he remembered that night in jail. How an earthquake shook the prison, broke their chains, and opened prison doors. He remembered the

jailer begging him, “What must I do to be saved?”<sup>20</sup> And he remembered how the jailer, and his entire family, believed in Jesus Christ.

Three stories. Three very different people. Yet all three had one thing in common – Jesus. And that’s our story as well. A church filled with very different people, yet with one thing in common – Jesus. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me ... I once was lost, but now I’m found, was blind, but now I see.” What do we have in common? We all have a God story, about how we came to Jesus.

So thank God for your story and tell your story.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> What do a rock star, a mobster, and a redneck have in common?



<sup>2</sup> See Acts 12:1-2.

<sup>3</sup> See Acts 12:3-16.

<sup>4</sup> See Acts 12:5.

<sup>5</sup> See Acts 12:7-10.

<sup>6</sup> See Acts 12:19.

<sup>7</sup> See Acts 12:20-23. Josephus writes about this scene and Herod's robe in *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 19.338-19.353.

<sup>8</sup> See Acts 13:1-3.

<sup>9</sup> See Acts 13 travelogue.

<sup>10</sup> See Acts 13:6-11.

<sup>11</sup> See Acts 13:16-41.

<sup>12</sup> See Acts 13:50-14:1.

<sup>13</sup> "Divination" is used in the NASB and ESV. She possessed πνεῦμα πύθωνα (pneuma pythona), the spirit of Python.

<sup>14</sup> When these men could no longer profit from the girl, they were outraged. A similar thing happened in Acts 19 at Ephesus. When people came to Christ, they no longer purchased small silver idols of the goddess Artemis (Diana). This outraged Demetrius who sold these idols.

<sup>15</sup> John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts*, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), page 267.

<sup>16</sup> See Acts 2:37.

<sup>17</sup> See also 1 Timothy 2:5, about Jesus being the one and only mediator to the Father.

<sup>18</sup> A liturgical morning prayer was called "The Blessings of the Dawn," or in Hebrew, Birkat HaShachar. It was originally part of the Babylonian Talmud. A fragment from the Cairo Geniza contains an expanded version of the traditional prayer. Thanking God "who has created me a human and not beast, a man and not a woman, an Israelite and not a gentile, circumcised and not uncircumcised, free and not slave." The prayer was not meant to demean women. It was a prayer thanking God for the blessing of being man, thus allowed to lead religious services. It was also a prayer thanking God for freedom, instead of being a slave, and thanking God for being one of His chosen people. So, it was a prayer of prejudice or arrogance.

<sup>19</sup> See Colossians 4:3, where Paul prays for an open door to share the Gospel.

<sup>20</sup> See Acts 16:30.