

## “BELIEVE IN THE LORD JESUS”

Acts 16:11–40

Key Verse: 16:31

“And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’”

Do you consider yourself a believer? Some might mumble, “Sure, I believe in Jesus.” But sadly, we often can’t tell if a person is really a Christian or not. What does it even mean to “believe”? Is it to just agree mentally? To hype it up emotionally? Or just go with the program quietly? No. In this passage, the newly formed missionary team enters Macedonia, in obedience to God’s vision. There, they show what it really means to believe in Jesus. So do two unlikely converts: a businesswoman named Lydia, and a jailer. This woman and man show us that really believing in Jesus gets expressed in concrete, practical ways. What does it mean to believe in the Lord Jesus? How can we receive, practice, and share our faith today? May God speak to us through his word.

Luke begins by sharing where the team goes. Troas was a coastal city in the northwest of Asia Minor (11; map). Immediately after Paul’s vision, they take a ship to Macedonia. This is a busy shipping lane in the North Aegean Sea. That evening the ship stops by the island of Samothrace, with the tallest mountain among all the Greek islands. The next morning they sail to Neapolis. This time God gives them a direct course, with no wandering, because they’re going where God wants. Philippi is “a leading city in the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony” (12; map). The city’s on a plain, surrounded by mountain ranges. Gold, silver, and copper mines are nearby, as well as fields good for crops and flocks. Philippi is wealthy. In 360 BC it was first settled by islanders from Thassos, and soon named “Philippi” after Philip II, father of Alexander the Great. He made a seaside settlement about ten miles away, called Neapolis, the port of Philippi. By 120 BC, Neapolis and Philippi were connected by a famous Roman road called the Via Egnatia (map). This road began at the Adriatic Sea and went all the way to Istanbul, about 700 miles. Walking on this road from Neapolis to Philippi would take just a couple hours. In 42 BC, Rome took over Philippi and made it a Roman

colony, settled by army veterans, and gave it tax free status.<sup>1</sup> By now, Philippi was like a small version of Rome. Luke writes, “We remained in this city some days.” Through the team, God does some amazing things here.

**First**, God opens a woman’s heart and home (13–15). We see here how God works: through prayer, through crossing barriers by faith in Jesus, and through careful listening. There don’t seem to be enough Jews in Philippi to form a synagogue. So on the Sabbath day Paul’s team goes outside the city to the riverside, supposing to find a place of prayer (13). Luke often mentions how those who believe in Jesus pray first.<sup>2</sup> At this place, the team meets women who’ve come together on the Sabbath to pray. To us it seems like the perfect chance to start talking. But in their culture, foreign men do not approach women. They could have thought, “These are not the right people. Let’s move on.” Instead, they sit down and begin speaking with the women. Today, how can we overcome barriers and speak to people of a different race, culture or gender? These team members do it because they really believe Jesus is for everyone.<sup>3</sup>

Look at verse 14. Thyatira is on the border between Asia and Mysia. It was famous for its dyeing facilities and for making purple cloth. Lydia must have learned her trade there. She probably branched out to Philippi because Romans loved the imperial color purple. She owns a house and has a household (15a,40). She’s good at business, but she’s also “a worshiper of God.” In Acts, we see other non-Jews called “worshippers,” “devout” or those who “fear God.”<sup>4</sup> Lydia is one of them. In Thyatira she must have attended a nearby synagogue to know God better. In Philippi she’s still seeking him.

Look at verse 14b. “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.” Believing in Jesus begins in our hearts (Rom.10:9). And only God can help us believe. But how? He helps Lydia pay attention to what is being said by Paul. It reminds us of Romans 10:17: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” But when someone is speaking the word of Christ, we so easily get distracted. We zone out, or look at the person critically

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<sup>1</sup> After the assassination of Julius Caesar, there was a famous battle at Philippi between his assassins Brutus and Cassius and his successors Mark Antony and Octavian, who defeated them.

<sup>2</sup> 1:14,24; 2:42; 3:1; 4:31; 6:4,6; 8:15; 9:11,40; 10:2,4,9,30–31; 11:5; 12:5,12; 13:3; 14:23, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Luke often highlights women in gospel history: 1:14; 5:14; 8:3,12; 9:2,36; 12:12; 17:4,12,34; 18:2,18,26; cf. Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna in Luke’s Gospel; also Luke 8:1–3; 23:49,55; 24:10,22,24; Phil.4:2–3.

<sup>4</sup> See 8:27; 10:2,7,22; 13:16,26,43,50; 17:4,17; 18:7.

instead of listening. But God helps Lydia to pay attention to his word spoken by Paul. “Pay attention” means to consider it carefully. Still today, God can open anyone’s heart to truly believe in Jesus through prayerful and careful listening.

And Lydia’s believing isn’t just private. Read verse 15. She’s baptized because she believes in Jesus, in his death and resurrection. It’s not just a ritual; through baptism she commits her life to follow Jesus and joins these fellow believers. Through her newfound faith in Jesus, she influences her household also to be baptized. Her believing goes even further. She insists on opening her home to Paul and the team. From the beginning, she is serving in faith. She makes Jesus the Lord of her home, providing hospitality for God’s servants. So begins her partnership with Paul, supporting him in the gospel work (40).<sup>5</sup>

**Second**, God heals a slave girl (16–18). Here God works through believing the power of Jesus’ name and having compassion for one enslaved person. This girl’s situation shows the spiritual darkness in Philippi. Though it’s a fancy new Roman city, people are living under the devil’s rule. Verse 16 begins, “As we were going to the place of prayer...” It’s not just once; they go there regularly. Regular prayer is the foundation of the team’s mission in Philippi. If we believe in Jesus, we pray fervently to fight against unseen forces of evil (Eph.6:11–12,18). This place out by the river is ideal for the team to pray and share the gospel. Probably new believers are bringing others there to hear Paul’s gospel message. One day, on their way, they’re met by a slave girl who has a spirit of divination; and she brings her owners much gain by fortune-telling (16b). This poor girl, though a human being, is enslaved and made use of, to bring others much gain. This is what the devil’s rule is always like.

What happens? Look at verse 17. It was just like what happened when Jesus encountered a demon-possessed man (Luke 8:28). The demon in the girl could see that Paul and his team were servants of the Most High God. The demon says, “...they proclaim to you the way of salvation.” With this knowledge the demon is trying to have power over them. Verse 18a says, “And this she kept doing for many days.” Paul endured for quite a while, probably to avoid causing a ruckus that would distract from his ministry. But one day he becomes “greatly annoyed.” “Greatly annoyed” means “provoked” or even “pained.” Paul is not angry at the girl, but at the devil ruining her life and trying to distract from the

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<sup>5</sup> See also Phil.1:5; cf. Matt.10:11.

gospel ministry. Paul turns and says to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it comes out that very hour (18b). This is another part of believing in Jesus. It means believing in the power of his name to drive the evil spirits out of people. Paul doesn’t calculate; in great compassion for a human being, he drives the spirit out by the power of Jesus’ name. If we believe in Jesus, we gain discernment to see the devil’s work, and fight the good fight to resist the devil and drive him out. This healed girl likely was welcomed and cared for by this new Christian community in Philippi.

**Third**, God sends an earthquake (19–26). Here God shows how he works, even amid suffering and darkness, if we would just keep praying and singing his praises. Now the slave girl’s owners are so upset. They seize Paul and Silas and drag them into the marketplace before the rulers of the city (19). This is really about money. But they begin by saying, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city” (20b). Because the city is predominantly Roman, they stir up racism and accuse Paul and Silas of “disturbing” the peace, saying, “They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice” (21). They appeal to people’s Roman pride. Then things go crazy. The crowd joins in attacking them, and the magistrates tear the garments off them and give orders to beat them with rods (22). It’s how they deal with foreigners perceived as a threat. They inflict many blows on them, throw them in prison, and order the jailer to keep them safely (23). So he puts them in the inner prison and fastens their feet in the stocks, which are large blocks of wood (24).<sup>6</sup> Through believing in Jesus, Paul and Silas are sharing Christ’s sufferings (1 Pet.4:13).

It’s really dark and dirty in the inner prison, and they’re bleeding from their beating. The future of their mission looks dark. In fact, their lives might soon be over. What do they do? Read verse 25. They’re trapped, in the worst situation, in the deepest darkness, but they’re praying and singing hymns to God. It’s another aspect of believing in Jesus. No discouragement, no darkness, no pain, can make them despair, give up, or give in. The worst times are the best time to start singing hymns of praise to God. We can always praise him, anywhere, anytime, because of who he is and what he’s done for us in Jesus. In believing in Jesus, personally reading the Bible, praying, and singing hymns should be our daily practice. We’re not sure how good Paul and Silas are at singing. But their spirit is heart-moving. They believe that serving Jesus our Risen Lord and King, even

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<sup>6</sup> Luke repeatedly uses this Greek word “xulon” to describe Jesus hung on a “tree” (5:30; 10:39; 13:29).

suffering humiliation for him, is the greatest joy and blessing. They're in pain, but full of his grace and living hope. And the other prisoners are listening.

What happens? A great earthquake shakes the foundations of the prison. Immediately all the doors are opened and everyone's bonds are unfastened (26). It's so interesting: nobody moves! The earthquake comes because Paul and Silas believe in God Almighty. The living God still comes to fight for his servants and rescue us, if we just keep on believing, praying, and praising him. The living God can do what no human being can. If we keep on believing in Jesus, he can set us free from any darkness or hopelessness, and change everything.

**Fourth**, God saves the jailer (27–34). This is the highlight of the passage. Paul, suffering in prison, cares even for the man who locked him up, and helps him believe in the Lord Jesus. After the earthquake, the jailer wakes up, sees the prison doors open, and is about to kill himself with his sword, supposing the prisoners had escaped (27). But Paul sees him and cries out, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here” (28). It's the cry of a real shepherd. The jailer calls for lights, rushes in, and trembling in fear falls down before Paul and Silas (29). He brings them out of the inner prison and asks privately, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (30) Literally, the word “sirs” is “lords.” He realizes the earthquake has happened because of these men. But why does he ask about being saved? He's probably heard of the slave girl's words, who said so many times in the city that these men are proclaiming the way of salvation (17–18a). Now, though the prison doors are open and their bonds are unfastened, Paul and Silas don't run away—proving they're innocent. And the earthquake shows how fragile life is. It's a preview of divine justice. In light of God's power and justice, the jailer realizes he's a sinful man, and now he's serious about finding the way of salvation.

Read verse 31. “And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’” They are not “lords”; Jesus is Lord. This is a promise of God's grace. Jesus suffered the greatest injustice at the hands of sinful men. But God raised him from the dead, exalted him to his own right hand, and made him Lord of all. It's not just vindication, but redemption. Jesus died and rose again to forgive all our sins and give us the Holy Spirit. In our Risen Lord Jesus, though we're undeserving sinners, we have a living hope of the kingdom of God. To be saved, we don't need to do anything except sincerely repent and believe in him. No rituals, no amount of good deeds, hard work or sacrifice can

save us. Only believing in Jesus saves us. But it also means letting Jesus be Lord of our lives. It means struggling against our flesh, the world, and the devil, and surrendering our lives to obey him. We need to believe in Jesus as both Savior and Lord. And it says here, “you and your household.”<sup>7</sup> How can we help our children? It’s by truly believing in the Lord Jesus ourselves, and influencing them to live this same way. Read verse 32. In the middle of the night they take the time to help each person in the jailer’s household believe based on the word.

How does the jailer respond? Look at verse 33. Even before being baptized, he washes their wounds. He knows in that inner prison there was a great risk of infection. His tender care for them again shows what believing in Jesus looks like. He begins caring for others and serving. He also makes a real commitment to Jesus, identifying with the other believers, despite persecution. Look at verse 34. He also serves by opening his home like Lydia did and serving them food. And finally, he and his household are rejoicing in their faith in Jesus. Not complaining that it’s the middle of the night, but rejoicing. Rejoicing while serving is the final, tell-tale sign of really believing in Jesus.

**Fifth**, God vindicates his servants (35–40). This last part shows how God protects his people. Paul reveals that he and Silas are Roman citizens, and everyone is afraid (37–38). Why does he insist on an apology? It’s not for his bruised ego, but to protect the new believers there. In this, he’s a real shepherd.

So, what does it mean to believe in the Lord Jesus? It means: to receive the gift of faith through prayer and his word; to accept him as Savior and Lord; to share our faith with others; to challenge evil by the power of his name; to open our homes to care and to serve; to commit to Jesus and his people despite persecution; and to pray and rejoice in our Risen Lord, even in deep darkness. Read verse 31 again. May God help us truly believe in our Lord Jesus.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. 2:39; 11:14; 16:15,31,34; 18:8.