

Three Characters - Three Conversions

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[0 : 00] Well, it is a joy for me to be here, and thank you for the kind invitation to speak at this morning's service. We do give you a warm welcome along to the tent if you have the opportunity during the week. But before we turn our thoughts to God's Word, let's pray together.

Our gracious and eternal Father, we thank you for the privilege of bowing in your presence with your Word on our laps, and we pray now as we come to study it that we will experience the help of the Holy Spirit, who is ultimately the only infallible interpreter of Scripture. We pray, Lord, that we might have an encounter with you as you speak to us from the pages of this book that you inspired. We thank you that the Bible is a living book. We thank you that it's a light and a lamp, a hammer and a sword, and that it conducts all of these great ministries in our lives.

And we pray today that as we ponder it together, that you might bless us. We ask this humbly in Jesus' name. Amen. I don't know what the first church was on the island of Lewis. I was thinking about that this morning, saw a book on a shelf saying the history of Lewis. I wonder where the first congregation met on the island of Lewis. Well, in Acts chapter 16, we're told about the first church that met in Europe. This is the story of the beginnings of the first European church in Acts chapter 16. The backdrop to how it came about is fairly straightforward. Paul and Barnabas, who had conducted what we sometimes refer to as their first missionary journey on Cyprus and then up into the southern region of Galatia and planted a number of churches in what we would call the country of

Turkey. Then we turned to their sending church, which was Antioch, and on to Jerusalem for a discussion about whether or not Gentiles were equal brothers and sisters in the family of faith. And then, of course, when that discussion was had, they returned to Antioch and spent the winter there. And then when the shipping lines in the Mediterranean had opened up again, they decided, Paul and Barnabas, that they should launch a second missionary trip. Only Barnabas wanted to bring his cousin John Mark with them.

And at that stage, there was a great parting of the ways between these two great missionaries, Paul, the apostle and Barnabas, of course, who was the great encourager.

[3 : 06] Saul, or Paul, linked up with a man called Silas. And they traveled north into Syria and Cilicia, and then around the churches that Paul and Barnabas had founded in southern Galatia. And then they kept traveling westward towards the western coast of Turkey. He wanted to go down into Asia, where Ephesus was, but the Holy Spirit hindered him. Then he wanted to go up towards the Black Sea, but again, somehow the Holy Spirit hindered them from going up into that region. And so they made their way right out to Troas, where they linked up with Timothy. So now there is, or not Timothy, Luke. They already have Timothy. They picked him up in Lystra. So there's now Silas. There's now Paul. There's now Timothy.

And then in Acts chapter 16, they pick up Luke. If you read through the text carefully, as it was read, you may have picked this up, that for the first time in the book of Acts, the author of this book uses the word we. So up until now it's been they, but now it's we because he is now part of this missionary team. When they were in Troas, Paul received a vision of a man in Macedonia saying, come over and help us. And so immediately they left Troas and they traveled north, Salmon Thrace, Neapolis, and then walked the 10 miles or so up into Philippi. And that's really where we break into the story. Philippi was a great place to live. It had been the site of a fierce battle between forces that had been loyal to the empire and two rebels called Brutus and Cassius.

And the forces that were loyal to the empire were victors in that fight. And as a consequence of that victory, Philippi was granted the status of a Roman colony. So it was a great place to live.

They had all of the privileges and all of the rights of people living in the imperial city itself, Rome, which was 1,200 miles away. It was a bit like, I don't know, whether it was a bit like a Glasgow or an

Edinburgh.

It wasn't quite London, but it was a fantastic place to live if you like the city. And the missionaries arrive at this strategic location, having been prompted by the Spirit, no doubt, to have gone there through this vision that Paul received. And what I want to do this morning is just look at these three characters into whose lives the gospel broke and into whose lives were transformed by the grace of God. And these three founding members of the church in Philippi. Now, the three, I have no fancy way of dividing up the text other than the three characters that are mentioned, a businesswoman, a slave girl, and a rough and tumble jailer.

[6 : 13] Those are my three headings. So first of all, a businesswoman. Now, it seems that the missionaries arrived in Philippi midweek, so maybe a Wednesday, Tuesday or a Wednesday, somewhere around there, and it took them a day or two to find their bearings. Where would they find the market to buy some supplies like meat and vegetables? And where would they stay? It took them a day or two to find permanent lodgings, no doubt. But as soon as they settled in and the first Sabbath came around, they decided that they should start looking for a place to begin their evangelistic ministry.

Now, the obvious place would have been a synagogue. But it seems that there weren't ten Jewish families living in Philippi because there is no synagogue. All that there is is a handful of proselytes. Women down by the riverside studying the Old Testament. Believers in Yahweh or Jehovah, however you want to pronounce it, believers in the God of the Old Testament. But they're not fully embraced as members of the Old Covenant. They are not fully fledged Jews. But they are down by the riverside, and they're studying the Old Testament. And Paul hears about their existence, and he travels down to meet them. Now, a couple of things that I want to say about the leader of this group of women, who is Lydia. She appears to be the leader. At least you get the impression as you read the text that she is enjoying a prominent role in this little group of women. A couple of things about her.

It must have been clear to this group of women that Paul was, if you will, a Jewish teacher. He had been a Pharisee of the Pharisees. He had been a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He knew any passage of the Old Testament off by heart, no doubt, could have waxed eloquently in explaining it to anyone. He was someone who had devoted himself to the study of the law. So when these women who are studying the Old Testament discovered that there is an Old Testament scholar in their midst, they decide that they would listen to him.

And he's invited to speak to them. Now, a couple of things about Lydia. First of all, I just noticed that she was rich. She was rich. A couple of indications as to her wealth. She's not a native of Philippi.

[8 : 57] She comes originally from the city of Thyatira, which is just down, actually, not far from Troas, just a little bit down the coast where Paul left from just a few days earlier. But she has come to Philippi to further her trade or to ply her trade as a seller of purple cloth. So somehow she has discovered how to get purple dye and how to dye purple cloth and make it into garments that are attractive and then to sell it on the streets of Philippi. And she was on to a good thing because these Roman colonies were populated with retired veterans. So you imagine all of these soldiers fighting in the legions when they retire. They can't all go home to Rome because Rome has too many people as it is, restless and full bursting at the seams. So they sent these retired army veterans out to these Roman colonies. It was a great plan. And these retired Roman soldiers, many of them centurions and leaders of groups of men thought that they were fabulous and thought that everyone should know how important they were. And purple is the color of power and importance. And so they decide we should be wearing purple and people should know how important we are. Don't you know that we are the people who led the battles at the Hadrian's Wall at the north of England and kept all those

Scottish people out of the empire? So that's the kind of people that they were. And Lydia is selling purple cloth to them and they're snatching it off her. And she's on to a really good thing as far as business is concerned. And we know that she is well to do because she has a house which is big enough to accommodate all of the missionary team. Just in a moment's notice she says to them, you come and stay with me.

Her house is big enough to give Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke accommodation without any question along with her household servants. So she's a rich lady. But riches don't provide peace or contentment, do they? Someone has once said, money hasn't made anyone happy yet and it never will. Riches are not everything. And success in business is not everything. And that was true for

Lydia. And she knew it.

That's why she's down by the riverside studying the Old Testament. She knows that riches don't answer the greatest needs of her heart. She knows that there is still something desperately missing in her life.

And she's down by the riverside despite the fact that she is successful. She's down by the riverside studying the Bible to see if she can find it. John Lennon, who made millions through his career with the Beatles and the business genius of his wife,oko Ono, said in a television interview before he died, before he was shot actually, he said, I cannot remember a time in my life when I was without sadness.

[12:18] I cannot remember a time in my life when I was without sadness. Robert Maxwell climbed to the top of the ladder, he said, financially. And he said when he got there, he discovered there was nothing there.

See, money can't give you peace with God. Money can't give you eternal security. There's a lot of things that money can't give you. And Lydia's cute enough, she knows that that's true.

She's religious. She is not a Jew, but she believes in the God of the Jews. She believes in the God of the Old Testament. She's been profoundly interested or influenced by the Jewish community in her hometown of Thyatira.

And now that she has moved to Philippi, she's got the perfect opportunity just to offload everything that she has learned in her hometown. Just to forget all about it. To wave goodbye to the past.

But not Lydia. She brings her religious convictions with her to Philippi. And she doesn't give up on the study of the Old Testament in her search for God.

[13:30] She doesn't give up on that. She meets with a group of women down by the riverside to see if she can discover the truth. And you get the impression from the text that Lydia is the leader of this group.

So here's a lady, and she's religious. She's studying the Old Testament. She believes in God. But she's not a disciple of Jesus.

She's never heard about Jesus. She doesn't even know that Jesus exists. And her heart is still closed. Because the Bible says in the passage that was read for us, that God opened her heart. Which means that if God opened her heart, prior to God opening her heart, despite all of her knowing that something was wrong, knowing that something was missing, her heart was still closed to God and the Gospel.

You see, you can be religious and not be a Christian. John Wesley went out to the state of Georgia as a missionary. And as a preacher in Savannah, and he was preaching in the pulpit, Sunday by Sunday, and he wrote in his journal one day, I went out to convert the Indians.

[14:49] But who, oh God, will convert me? And it wasn't until he came back to London and sat in a meeting in Aldersgate Street and listened to somebody read the preface to Luther's commentary on the book of Romans, that the Gospel suddenly gripped him and his heart was strangely warmed.

And Lydia needs her heart open. She's rich. She's religious. But here is the third thing that I want you to notice about Lydia. She's responsive. She's responsive.

So she listens to Paul. And with no idea what Paul said to her, we have no idea what Paul said to this little group of women studying the Old Testament down by the riverside.

I suspect that he took them, looking at some of the other sermons that he preached, thinking about the ministry of Jesus, I suspect that he took them on a tour of the Old Testament, that he took them to Genesis 3.15 and spoke about the one who would crush the head of the serpent, that he took them to the sacrificial system and showed them how something that was without spot and without blemish was taking the place of someone that was guilty.

That he took them to the prophets and took them to Isaiah 53 and said, listen to the words of the prophet, speaking about someone who would yet come. He would be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities and the Lord would lay on him the price of our peace, the iniquities of us all.

[16:25] And he would bear the wounds in our place. And I am pretty sure that the Apostle Paul would have said, Jesus is the fulfillment of all of that. The Messiah that is spoken of in this Old Testament that you are studying is none other than Jesus of Nazareth.

Now, he couldn't expect too much. This was the first time they had ever heard the gospel. Could he really expect them to respond to it? Could he really expect them to respond to this message and do

something about what they have just listened to?

Shouldn't he come back for like five or six weeks and maybe at the end of a six week series, maybe then he could expect a response. Oh no, God was at work.

God opened the heart of the leader and she believed the gospel. She put her faith and trust in Christ as Savior. How many times have we heard the gospel and we still haven't put our faith and trust in Christ?

Well, here's Lydia and she's responsive. And we're told about her household that they too were baptized with her. It would appear that they too became believers.

[17 : 38] But I want secondly to mention the slave girl. The slave girl. It's very different from Lydia. Not a successful business woman. Very, very different.

Not wealthy, well-to-do woman with her own house who could put up a team that just arrived in town at a moment's notice. Very different girl. This girl, a couple of things about her.

First of all, her demon possession. This girl seems to have been able to tell people things about their future. She had some kind of clairvoyant ability.

I am absolutely convinced that only God is omniscient. Only God knows the end from the beginning. The devil does not know the end from the beginning.

And he does not know everything. But he knows things that you and I don't know. And on the basis of his knowledge he's able somehow to make accurate predictions about the future. And somehow this girl is tapping into powers that she should have ran a thousand miles from.

[18 : 42] Somehow she's tapping into these powers and she's able to tell people things about their future. And it's interesting that not only is she able to do that but she's being exploited and abused by people who see a potential to make money from her.

Doesn't it sound all so familiar? Here's a poor girl who is really disturbed in many ways and people are exploiting and abusing her.

It's interesting in the Greek text it says that she was possessed of a python spirit. A python is a constrictor. It wraps itself around you and it just crushes you.

And I thought as I read that in the original text I thought isn't that a great picture of what Satan does to people? Just destroys them. Crushes them. Brokenness is absolutely everywhere you look.

You don't need to go rummaging around far in any family before you see extreme evidence of complete brokenness. My grandfather was a drunk on the streets of Edinburgh.

[19 : 58] And he fell down a flight of stairs and cracked his skull and went into eternity and I have no idea where he went. My only hope is that maybe, just maybe he went to the free breakfast at Curlber's and there heard about Jesus who could save him.

That's my only hope. But it seems to me as I look around families and as I look around the city of Edinburgh where I live and even here in conversations that I've already had with people it seems to me that brokenness is just absolutely everywhere.

The devil specializes in ruining lives. Maybe you're not like this girl but maybe you can identify with her to some extent.

Maybe you know that in the honesty of your heart that you are estranged from God you're not in the right place and that sin has got a hold of you and somehow you need God's forgiveness and God's deliverance.

Well this girl's deliverance not just her demon possession. She was crying out as these men were coming and going from this place of prayer to the city. She would follow them and cry out these men are servants of the most high God who are telling us the way to be saved or who are showing us the way.

[21 : 21] That's what she's crying out. Now I don't Paul is frustrated with what's happening in this girl and I don't know why he took as long as he did to set her free not in his own name but in the name of Jesus but somehow he saw this girl delivered and set free in the gospel and I just want to tell you this much I believe that God's gospel can transform lives and I've seen it over the course of my ministry as a minister of a church in two countries I've seen the gospel transform lives this is a true story and I better keep moving but I was speaking at an event outside Toronto and a man came up to me and said I was a Mormon missionary back in Ireland and he said I was walking through Belfast on my way home I'd got off the Liverpool ferry and I was on my way to Dublin on the train and he says a little man pulled up on the roadside beside me in a red car and he rolled down the window and I was a Mormon missionary with my badges and my whole regalia on carrying two suitcases and the man said to me what are you doing son no church can get you into heaven only

Jesus can get you into heaven and he rolled up the window and drove on and he said

I was so tormented by that that for the next two weeks I could hardly sleep and two weeks later I went into a Christian church that I knew of in Dublin and asked them who is this Jesus and how can I get to know him here's a Mormon missionary transformed by the gospel and I could repeat that story a thousand times over the years as I've seen the gospel transform lives and here's a girl and she's been set free by the gospel set free by the gospel well finally let's think for a few minutes about the prison warden Murdo will have to go over this passage and deal with some of the details that I'm leaving out someday the prison warden couple of things about this prison warden just before I leave that girl isn't it isn't it striking that she was converted what a great message for the church in Europe the gospel is not just for successful business women it's for broken exploited and abused people and it can transform their lives another great lesson no matter how deep sin goes his grace his grace can go deeper still that's the great lesson from this girl but the prison warden the singing prisoners so Paul finds himself in trouble the people who are making money from this girl are upset that she is no longer working for them they stir up the authorities

Paul is brought before them and he finds himself in prison having been beaten 39 times with a Roman rod 39 wallops he received of a Roman rod and then he is put in stocks in the inner sanctums of the prison and as Paul and Silas are sitting there they are singing for all that they are worth now you say to yourself how can they sing their back must have been aching they must have been shaking with a sense of shock as their body went into shock having received this beating they must have been unable to lie backwards they must have just had to sit upright such would have been the pain in their back I mean their back must have looked like a pot of jelly if you ever look at a jelly pot black and blue and all soft what a mess their backs must have been but here they are at midnight singing for all that they are worth Spurgeon once said it's easy to sing when you can read the notes by daylight but only a skillful singer can sing when there is not a ray of light and the reason that these men are singing and not feeling sorry for themselves in the corner saying oh look at me isn't this awful how terrible that God would allow this to happen to us we are missionaries trying to serve God why would God allow this to happen to us instead of that they are rejoicing in their riches in Christ they are rejoicing in the fact that they have got they have got things that no external circumstances can ever take from them their sins though they were many have all been washed away they know that they have been accepted by the father's children reconciled to the God that they were estranged from they know that they are on their way to heaven I was reading Jonathan Edwards the other day in religious affections talking about the joy of the anticipation of heaven that's something to sing about and here they are singing for all that they are worth and it's making a powerful impression on the people that are in the prison here's the second thing the singing prisoners the shaking of the prison at midnight there was an earthquake the prison began to violently shake and the doors were opened and this prisoner this jailer thought that the prisoners had all escaped and he thought that he would be publicly humiliated because he had been told to keep these prisoners safe in the inner sanctums of the prison they were in stocks and chains and if they had gone he would be dragged out and publicly humiliated and so to save himself from that he was going to run his own sword through himself and Paul says don't harm yourself we're all here and he called for lights and he dragged them out of the dungeon because it was probably a low ceiling hole in the middle of the jail he drags them out and he says to them what must I do to be saved how did he know he needed to be saved had he had a conversation with

Lydia had he seen the transformation in that little servant girl had he been listening to the singing of those prisoners and realized that they had something he didn't have they had a forgiveness he knew nothing about couldn't sing about how did he know that he needed to be saved well somehow he knew that he needed to be saved and he cried out to the Lord to save him believe on the Lord Jesus Christ is what he was told Jesus is the way to heaven isn't he he is the one that was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities and God had shook this man shaken this man's world to its very foundations remember many years ago conducting a funeral service for a young man who had died in the church that I served as minister just about 40 years of age two young children left behind and a wife and but in the congregation there was a lady sitting and the tears were running down her face she was next door neighbor and she went home that evening and she was sitting in her living room with her husband and the tears were still running down her face and her husband said to her what's wrong with you and she says

[28 : 47] I'm a sinner and I need to get right with God and actually her husband says you're not a sinner I'm a sinner and he was right he was a sinner but she said to him no no it's me and she went upstairs and got right with God because through that tragic death God had shaken her world to its very foundations sometimes God does that to get our attention to bring us to an end of ourselves to bring us to the place where we realize that he is the answer I wonder has God been shaking your world has God been shaking your world trying to get your attention so that you too will ask the question what must I do to be saved how can I be right with God how can I escape hell how can I be sure that I'm going to heaven believe on the Lord Jesus Christ put your trust in Jesus and what he did on the cross and trust him as your savior that is the only the only way well finally we're told that the whole jailer's house believed the whole jailer's household believed that's what we're told in the text as it was read for us and then they were baptized what a great blessing don't you think what a great blessing to have your whole house converted you know you'll never believe this but I've got five children my oldest daughter's 21 she'll soon be 22 and my youngest boy is 14 and the rest of them are steps and stairs between that and they're doing well in life one of them studying medicine at

Edinburgh the other's studying engineering one of them's just finished a maths they're doing fine but you know what my great passion in life it's not that they will do well in life you know what my great passion in life as a father is that when I get to the other side when I get to the other side and I look around my great prayer is each of them will be there how awful it would be if one of them was missing this jailer's whole household was converted what a great blessing will you be missing will you be there are you sure that you're one of God's people mum and dad might be Christians brothers and sisters might be Christians but you're not and you won't be there what a tragedy I plead with you to do what this jailer did three very different stories a business woman an exploited girl and a rough and tumble jailer but the grace of God transformed each of their lives and can transform our lives in the way that it transformed the lives of these people well let's sing our closing praise please it's psalm 40 and after

I close this after we sing this praise I'm going to ask the minister if he will close the service in prayer so psalm 40 I waited for the lord my god and patiently did bear at length to me he did incline my voice and cry to hear and I think all of these characters could have resonated with verse 2 he took me from a fearful pit and from the miry clay and on a rock he set my feet establishing my way I waited for the lord my god and patiently did bear at length to me he did incline my voice and cry to hear he took me from a fearful pit and from the miry clay and on a rock he set my feet establishing my way he put a new song in my mouth our god to magnify many shall see it and shall fear and on the lord rely oh blessed is the man whose trust upon the lord relies respecting not the proud nor such has turned aside to lies oh lord my god who who many are the wonders thou hast done thy gracious thoughts to us were far above of all thoughts are gone in order none can reckon them to thee if them declare and speak of them

I would they more than can be numbered are oh lord our gracious god enable us we pray to respond to thy truth and lord we thank thee for the reminder this morning that when the roll is called up yonder will we be there oh lord that none of us would be missing when we gather in Emmanuel's land that none of us would be found outside the kingdom and locked out for all eternity lord help us to hear help us to respond that thy spirit would work in us and through us to do as the jailer did to believe on the lord jesus christ knowing that when we do we will be saved lord part us with thy blessing asking that grace mercy and peace from god the father son and holy spirit would rest and remain with us all both now and forever more amen