

“WHAT DOES A GENUINE SALVATION EXPERIENCE LOOK LIKE?”

(Acts 16:11-34)

Two extremely important (crucial) things happened at the seaside city of Troas. Those two things would effect the history of Christian missions and the history of the western world (including the United States) forever. First, The missionary team of Paul, Silas, and Timothy was joined by the brilliant Dr. Luke at Troas. Probably locally caused by the fact that Paul had developed a serious eye problem in his travels through Asia Minor, and aided by the likelihood that Paul led Dr. Luke to Christ (possibly in his doctor’s office in Troas), this addition to the team proved extremely eventful for the future of the Christian movement. Dr. Luke became the brilliant writer of two historical documents of Christian apologetics, one a story of Christ which we know as the Gospel of Luke, the other the history of missions in the early church. Second, Paul received in a night of uneasy rest “the Macedonian call,” or the vision of “a man of Macedonia” (Acts 16:9), standing before Paul and pleading with him, saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Remember that Paul’s team had just traveled a southeast to northwest corridor through Asia Minor, and twice had tried to turn to mission fields to preach the Gospel and begin the Christian movement in these fields, but “they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in (the province of) Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them.” Remember, also, that Paul was following “a heavenly vision” in mapping out his itinerary, and these prohibitions of the Spirit must have been extremely challenging, even discouraging, to him and his team. Why would the same God who called him to the work and to world impact through missionary work close two doors in his face? But it is always best to trust the Divine Chairman of the Missions Committee, the Holy Spirit! He had far bigger plans in mind for this team than the evangelization of two small areas. He wanted to begin the evangelization of southern Europe!

In 1620 a ship left Plymouth, England, with men of strong hearts and an intense love of liberty as passengers. In that ship were the ripe seeds of a new civilization which was to be developed under new circumstances, the seeds of life as we find it (though much distorted) in the United States today. But this departure from England, though pregnant with great destiny, is not to be compared with a departure of four men on board a ship in A.D. 52, departing from Troas and bound for Philippi. One of the men was Paul the Apostle, a strong, determined, fearless leader. Another was Silas, an earnest preacher whom I call “the trouble-shooter of the early church.” The third was Dr. Luke, obviously a cultured professional man, a man of scientific training, a physician, historian and writer. The fourth man on the trip was a “diamond in the rough”, as yet uncut and unpolished, but full of astounding potential. Up to this point, Asia had led the world, but now the balance of power would begin to shift to the west—to Europe and America—and this voyage across the northern arm of the Aegean Sea was a significant part of the beginning of the shift.

When the group arrived in Philippi, some strange and seemingly insignificant things happened quickly, and out of them the foundation of the Philippian church was

solidly laid. When you read Paul's letter to the Philippians, remind yourself that the stories that make up our text reveal the strange *beginning* of the church to which he wrote this shining letter.

Our text records, in rapid succession, a trio of personal conversions to Christ. Some years ago, a Harvard psychologist wrote a book entitled, Varieties of Religious Experience. Professor James would have had a field day observing these three conversion occurrences in Acts 16! One was the conversion of a woman named Lydia. The other two persons are unnamed in any Biblical account. Only Lydia's name is retained in the Holy Spirit's record for future reference. We call them by a proper name and two descriptive terms—Lydia, a local slave-girl, and the Philippian jailor. In this study, we want to analyze their respective conversion experiences. This study began for me years ago, and it was a veritable eye-opener about the kinds of genuine conversions to Christ that Christians may experience.

The Implications of the Chapter

Acts 16 is a grand chapter on personal conversion, and provides several case studies on the Christian doctrine of salvation. We are first going to examine the implications of the Christian word, "saved," as those implications are suggested by this chapter. The word is used in the question which a shaken jailor asked two of his prisoners who had led a jailhouse "revival" in his prison, the question, "Sirs, what must I do to be *saved*?" Why did a rough Roman soldier use the word "saved"? What prompted his mind to thrust this word onto his lips? From a Christian standpoint, what implications are always conjured by the word "saved"?

The first implication in the word "saved" is that *there is a danger to be saved from*. This is clear and consistent teaching of the entire New Testament, that human beings are universally sinners, and that sin is an extremely dangerous ingredient in human experience (even the slightest, most "innocent" sin). Now, the three people whose conversions are described in our text had different degrees of *awareness* of sin and its danger, but even the fact that men are *totally blind* to their sinful and threatened condition does not reduce or lessen the threat of their condition one whit. A person laughing his way through life is likely strutting his way directly to hell! All the suave and casual Christless people you meet, perhaps daily, are moving one-minute-at-a-time, one-hour-at-a-time, one-day-at-a-time, one-week-at-a-time, one-month-at-a-time, one-year-at-a-time, one-decade-at-a-time, nearer to a serious eternal hell. This is a hateful thought to a typical sinner, but again, his blindness, ignorance and protest do not change reality. Every sin has in it the germ of *eternal damnation*, and this is the necessary, inevitable judgment of a holy, just, righteous, sovereign, *loving* God. What kind of parent would he be who did not deal with that which threatens to annihilate his entire family? Would he really love his family if he turned a blind eye to the killing disease when it is in fact curable *and he could provide the cure*, and a deaf ear to all the sounds of the misery generated by this disease?

In our text, Lydia, whose conversion to Christ is recorded first, impresses you as a decent, good, honorable, efficient, kind person—but *she still has to be saved to be acceptable to God in time or in eternity*. Read the story of the jailer (the third conversion account) again, and remember that he not only faced the disgrace of knowing that he had failed in his only vocational assignment if his prisoners have escaped, but that Roman law required that he forfeit his own life for this failure. However, this particular threat was resolved when he discovered that all of his prisoners were still present and accounted for, though the prison doors were opened and their chains were all loosed by the earthquake.

The jailer's consciousness was probably aroused, sharpened and intensified by what he heard concerning the charge that put Paul and Silas in his jail. Paul had precipitated a social riot among the panders of a local slave girl when he cast a "demon of divination" out of her. Paul's action was stimulated by her cry in the street of Philippi as she followed the team of missionaries through the city, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us *a way of salvation*." Her cry contained a very real truth, but she proclaimed it with a totally false spirit. Perhaps the jailer heard a recitation of the charge that brought these men to his prison. Also, he surely had noted their extremely strange behavior when, in spite of their discomfort (the beating and the stocks) "at midnight Paul and Silas were praying (he had probably heard many a prayer from a blasphemous prisoner, but surely nothing like this!) and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them." If I had been in their place, I would have been singing, "Rescue the perishing; care for the dying," but they probably sang "How Great Thou Art!" or "My Tribute"! Anyway, this criminally hardened jailer, who had worked his way up by tough fighting in the Roman military and had been given this job as a reward, was suddenly awakened to a need for a salvation far more important even than the saving of his earthly life. By a miracle of sudden illumination, the opening up of the eyes of his heart and flooding them with light (Ephesians 1:17), he became starkly aware that there was a more desperate death than physical death, and that there was a salvation that would meet his deepest need. *He knew he was perishing and needed to be saved!* The same is true of every person who has never come to know Christ in the full pardon of his sins and in the reception of Christ's gift of eternal life. There is a serious danger to be totally saved from

The second implication of the chapter is that *there is a destiny to be saved to*. One of the great caricatures of the western church is that salvation is basically *from* something, *from* sin, death, judgment and hell, but we have largely ignored the gigantic and boundless inventory of what the one-time-sinner, now a saint of God, has been saved *to*. *The salvation of the Bible is a line of demarcation, a point of absolutely new departure, an introduction into an entirely difference life-orientation, the instant of becoming heir to God's vast estate of truth, resources, life, love, joy, peace, etc, etc, etc, ad infinitum!!!!* God's salvation makes a radical difference in one's life—a day and night, life and death, Heaven and Hell difference! Tragically, many a Christian evaluates his salvation on the thoroughly inferior basis of a rescue from Hell and a pre-paid ticket to a nebulous Heaven. The real dimensions of this Heaven in which he believes he will "spend eternity" he has not even explored (what a strange inconsistency), taking his

“Heavenology” from sentimental songs which magnify the pleasant temperature and the beautiful furniture of the place, but ignore the life we will know and live there and the basis for it. The salvation of the Bible involves a moment-by-moment, day-by-day, etc., destiny we are saved to—and it is far bigger than the tame life of going to church as if we were part of the pews we sit in.

The third implication of the word “saved” is that *there is a **dynamic** to be saved by*. In Romans 1:16, the Apostle Paul testified, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power (Greek, *dunamis*, or “dynamic”) of God unto salvation to every one who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” No person is saved unless he has been inwardly revolutionized by the dynamic of God through the message of the Good News of Christ! Paul gave a slightly different twist to the same truth when he wrote to the Corinthians, “The word of the Cross is to them that are perishing foolishness, but to those who are being saved it is the power (Greek, *dunamis*, or “dynamic”) of God” (I Corinthians 1:18). This dynamic of God is like a swinging wrecking ball inside a person, collapsing and destroying the pleasure of sin and its stronghold in a person’s life, and like a Divine construction crew, rebuilding the life with a new meaning, a new purpose, a new loyalty, a new vocation, new goals, a new product, a new destiny,.... *What I am saying is that “all things are new” when a person is suddenly transplanted by the dynamic of God out of Adam, out of sin, out of death, and into Christ (II Corinthians 5:17).*

This dynamic was clearly released into the lives of the three persons in our text. In Lydia’s conversion, “The Lord opened her heart,” and it is the word that would be used for the silent, unobtrusive, but very beautiful opening of a rose to the early morning sun. In the case of the slave girl on the street, Paul invoked “the Name of Jesus Christ” and addressed the demon of divination in the girl, saying, “I command you to come out of her,” and “he came out that very hour.” In the case of the jailer, Paul specifically detailed the activation of God’s dynamic in his shattered experience—“and he rejoiced...with all his household.”

This is an unvarying reality: Every saved person has been absolutely transformed by an out-of-this-world dynamic, “the power of God unto salvation.”

The fourth implication of the word “saved” is *there is a **dependence** to be saved through*. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8, “By grace are you saved *through faith*.” “Faith” is the shorthand word of the Gospel which explains the dependence through which sinners are saved. “Faith” is a *relational* word—through faith I am livingly and vitally related to God. It is a *resource* word—through faith I receive and appropriate all of the resources that are available in Christ (a veritable and vast treasure trove of resources). It is a *rescue* word—through faith I have been rescued (past tense) from every destructive factor in the universe, am now being rescued (present tense), and will yet be fully and finally rescued (future tense).

I have spent a lot of my life traveling. The nature of “the ministry I have received of the Lord” is such that it entails a lot of long-distance traveling. I have boarded many

an airplane for long flights. I don't suppose I have ever boarded a plane without the awareness that I am committing myself to the plane, an instrument designed to fly, to the pilot, a person assigned to fly it, and that once the door closes behind me, my destiny is identified with the plane. I simply sit down in my seat, fasten my seat belt, and trust.

I make no contribution to the trip whatsoever while I am on board the plane, but every plane I have so trusted accomplishes the desired service. Of course, my faith is only as sound as its object, and an airplane and/or its pilot can fail! A sinner convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit and, does the same thing with regard to Jesus Christ the Savior of sinners. The sinner places his faith and trust in the most reliable Person in the universe, suspending his entire destiny in Christ's hands. He ceases self-trust, trust of any other thing or person (including himself), and totally trusts Christ to save him. This happens in every true Christian conversion.

In the case of Lydia, "the Lord opened her heart *to heed the things spoken by Paul*" (Acts 16:14). This is "the obedience of faith" of Romans 16:26. In the case of the slave girl, the control of the demon of divination was replaced by the control of the Divine indwelling Savior, creating a protest riot among her former employers. In the case of the jailer, he obeyed Paul's injunction to "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ," and he truly trusted Christ and was saved, along with the believing members of his household. This is the dependence of faith, through which sinners are saved from sin and all of its by-products, and to Christ and all of His resources and responsibilities.

II. The Instructions of the Chapter

This chapter is loaded with significant *instructions* about the practical dimensions of God's salvation. The "salvation questions" of *who, when, where* and *how* are addressed and answered in the conversion stories told in our text.

First, we learn in these stories that *any person can be saved*. The early Christians, most of whom were Jews, had to learn that God is no respecter of persons. This trinity of conversion accounts confirms that truth. The extraordinary thing about Paul's missionary work in Philippi, and the Spirit's salvation work through the missionary team in Philippi, is that an amazing cross-section of the culture of the Roman colony of Philippi was impacted through this work.

Lydia was a cultured business woman who represented the top end of the social scale. She was a cultured, dignified, calm, attractive woman. Although the missionary team had been brought to Philippi by the vision of "a man of Macedonia," Paul's first convert was a woman! And this first convert in Europe was a woman from Asia, from Thyatira, in the very area where Paul had been forbidden to enter! In fact, the only people present at the prayer meeting in Philippi in which Lydia was saved were women. The Gospel of Jesus Christ entered Europe through a women's club!

The slave-girl who was saved amid the traffic of a busy downtown street in Philippi was essentially the opposite in character and culture to Lydia. The girl was more like an animal or a piece of living slave-property. She was at the bottom end of the social

scale of the city. While Lydia had to be saved *in spite of* her culture and her character, the slave-girl had to be saved *because of* her personal culture and character. But they both had to be saved, and they found that the ground at the foot of the Cross is level ground, and that the life they found in Christ was the common life of every believer.

The Philippian jailer provided a worthy climax to these conversion stories. He was one of the sturdy middle class who largely made up the Roman civil service. His life had been brutalized inwardly by its history. He was a hardened customer when Paul and his team showed up in Philippi, and he already had a momentum of brutality when Paul and Silas were cast into his jail. He was simply practicing his norm when he beat Paul and Silas with rods (verse 22), one of the three such beatings Paul mentioned in II Corinthians 11:25. He added to their misery and revealed his deep-set norm of violence when “he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks” (verse 24). It is said that he did this because he was “commanded to keep them securely” (verse 23). This reminds me of Governor Pilate’s instructions given to the temple guards when they were about the place a giant stone at the mouth of Jesus’ tomb—to *guarantee that a dead man stayed dead!!!* Pilate spoke beyond his intelligence and awareness when he wryly said, “Make it as secure *as you can.*” The tomb could not finally imprison the Son of God, and the jail could not finally confine these sons of God! God the Father had a Bigger Agenda for all three sons than a grave and a jail!

Don’t these stories prove that any person can be saved? To further prove this truth, I itemized some of the conversions that are recited in the New Testament. Mary Magdalene was dispossessed of seven devils when Jesus saved her! Nathanael was rescued from his own morality when Jesus saved him! Nicodemus was saved from his “double damnation”—that of sin *and religion*—when Jesus saved him! Rich and traitorous Zacchaeus was saved from the enchantment and dependence of his own riches and wickedness when Jesus saved him! The first disciples were broken from their attachment to their fishing boats, their fishing nets and their parents when Jesus saved them! Luke was saved from the lesser vocation of a lucrative medical practice (!) into a loving ministry of missions when Jesus saved him! (Don’t misunderstand the previous sentence; a medical practice is only “lesser” because if a Dr. stops with that vocation, no matter how useful and productive, he has missed the “greater” vocation of living for the glory of God). The Ethiopian eunuch was saved from another “lesser” vocation, though the prime minister of the Ethiopian empire, when the Jesus of Isaiah 53 made Himself real to the eunuch through an itinerant preacher named Philip! Jesus saved a trinity of tentmakers when He saved Saul of Tarsus and his vocational associates, Aquila and Priscilla! He also saved a quisling tax-collector named Levi (later called Matthew)! And a lawyer named Zenas in the Book of Acts!

You see, friends, Jesus Christ can save *any person*.

The second “salvation lesson” of these stories is that *any person can be saved at any point of time*. The Savior of sinners never slumbers or sleeps, and He is alert to save any sinner who is aroused to repentance and faith. Think of the respective times of day in which sinners were saved in the Bible. On the Day of Pentecost, some 3,000 people were

saved in the time-proximity of 9 a.m.! In John 4, a Samaritan women was saved during the noon hour at the “lunch break” of Jesus’ disciples! Saul of Tarsus was saved at “midday” (Acts 26:13)! *How many of you reading these words were saved between sunup and noon on your day of destiny?* The thief who died on a cross beside Jesus was saved sometime between noon and 3 p.m. on the great Day of Atonement! John the beloved Apostle was saved sometime near 4 p.m.! *How many of you reading these words were saved between noon and sundown on your day of destiny?* Nicodemus was saved under the dark umbrella of night (John 3). *How many of you reading these words were saved after darkness and before dawn of the next day on your day of destiny?* You can poll an audience of saved people, and you will find a substantial representation in any part of a day—morning, afternoon, evening, night. Any person can be saved at any point of time! Now, there is a moment in which *nobody* can be saved, and that’s some *other* moment than *now*, and there is *one* moment in which you *must* be saved if at all, and that’s the *now* moment.

Lydia was saved in the morning; the slave-girl was saved in the late afternoon; and the jailer was saved at the strange hour of midnight. *Any sinner can be saved at any point of time!*

The third “salvation lesson” of this chapter is that any person can be saved at any point of time and in any place—*if he will trust the right Person*. In all cases mentioned, whether it be Mary Magdalene, or Nathanael, or Nicodemus, or Zacchaeus, or the first disciples, or Dr. Luke, or the Ethiopian Prime Minister, or the three tentmakers, or Levi the despised tax collector, or Zenas the lawyer, or Lydia, or the slave-girl, or the Philippian jailer—each of them had to commonly trust Jesus Christ, the Savior of sinners, and receive Him into their lives, in order to be saved. And in all cases, the Same Person did the saving. He Himself said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes unto the Father except by Me” (John 14:6). Sounds to me like He believed He was the only possible Savior of sinners—and my hearing is correct! In Acts 4:12, Simon Peter echoes this truth: “Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no second name under heaven by which sinners can/must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The right Person to save sinners is Jesus, and trust is the means of receiving Him and relating to Him.

These are the salvation lessons revealed in these conversion stories. We have just one more point to examine.

The Common Ingredients of Salvation

Finally, these stories show us *the common ingredients* in every genuine experience of salvation. Though salvation has no stereotype, each experience of salvation has certain common denominators.

First, in all three cases of salvation recorded in Acts 16, each sinner *heard a dynamic word from God*. With regard to Lydia, Luke says, “We sat down and spoke to

the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us....The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul” (verses 13, 14). Three times the text indicates that the Apostle Paul spoke Divine truth to the women, and Lydia heard, believed and trusted Christ to save her. In the story of the slave-girl, Paul turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her,” and “he came out that very hour” (verse 18). In the conversion of the jailer, Paul and Silas declared with Divine authority and authorization, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (verse 31). “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word (“hrema”, the living, quickening Word of God) of God” (Romans 10:17). Every sinner must hear the Gospel with a hearing that penetrates his heart with Divine power, or he will not be saved.

Second, in all these cases, each sinner *felt a definite sense of need*. There is a life-and-death difference between a need for Christ and a *felt* need for Christ. There is a vast difference between saying, “Oh, everyone needs Christ, I guess,” and “I am ruined by my sins; I need a Savior more than I need the air I breathe. What must I do to be saved?”

Third, in all three stories, *each sinner was transformed by the Divine Christ as personal Savior and Lord*. In Romans 15:7, Paul said, “Christ received each of us.” He was encouraging the Roman Christians to treat each other in exactly the same way Christ has treated us. He received each of us; we should receive one another. Here is an interesting feature of Paul’s statement: the word translated “received” is the Greek word, *proslambano*. This is a compound Greek word. The “lambano” part of the word means “to aggressively embrace.” The prefix “pros” means “face to face with.” So the word means to face the other person and aggressively embrace him. This is what God did to us. He saw us perfectly, reading us like the proverbial “open book”—and yet He aggressively embraced us anyway! That is grace! And one of the big salvation texts of the Gospel of John uses essentially the same word. John 1:12 says, “As many as *receive* Christ, to them gives He the power to become sons and daughters of God.” The word “receive” is basically the same word, and it again means “to aggressively embrace” Jesus Christ. Using a two-fisted grip of faith and embracing Him “with both arms” of trust, aggressively take Him into your heart. Nobody has been saved without such a transaction between him and Christ.

Finally, in all three of these conversion stories, *each saved sinner proved his definite conversion by a changed life*. Lydia, for example, begged for the privilege of showing thoughtful Christian hospitality. After she had been baptized, “she begged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.’” The slave-girl also showed evidence of her genuine conversion by forsaking her sinful business association in order to follow and serve Christ. The Philippian jailer’s transformation was remarkable. Using the same hands that had earlier *inflicted* the wounds on the backs of Paul and Silas, after his encounter with Christ, he now *washed* the very wounds he had made. Could there be a finer illustration of a transformed heart than this? “Hereby we know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren.” (I John 3:14).

Dear friend, have you heard this dynamic word from God that has effectually called you to Christ? Have you recognized your own personal Heaven-and Hell need for Christ? Have you aggressively embraced Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and Lord? Is there the radical evidence of definite conversion in your life, the evidence of a transformed life?

A little girl, beginning to show an awakened heart, said to her mother, “Mama, how can I come to Jesus when I can’t *see* Him?” The mother softly answered, “Do you remember when you asked me to get you a drink of water last night? Did you *see* me when you asked me?” “No, you were in the next bedroom, but I knew you would *hear* me and get it for me!” “Well, that’s the same way you come to Jesus. You can’t *see* Him, but you know that He is near and hears every word you say, and that He will give you what you need.” Dear friend without Christ, *Jesus will give you what you really need—Himself!* No one goes to Hell with Christ living in his heart, and no one goes to Heaven without Him there. He said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man will hear My voice, and open the door, I will come into him, and will sup with him, and he with me.” If there is a door between you and Jesus, and you are alone on the inside of your own heart, lost and condemned, why not open the door and receive Him at this moment? He will save you like He saved all the others in this story, and you can know His Presence, His pardon, His purpose and His power all the way to Heaven. Then, you will know and enjoy *Him and His Place* forever.