

As a medical student, Francis Collins was an atheist. He was convinced belief in God was no longer necessary because science eliminated the need for it. But the time came as a medical student when he found himself sitting at the bedside of people with terminal illnesses. Many of them were deeply committed to the faith. Collins said,

I was unsettled to see how they approached the end of life. This was something I was terrified about. They had peace and even a sense of joyfulness that there was something beyond. It made me realize I'd never really gone beyond the most superficial consideration of whether God exists or a serious consideration of what happens after you die.

Collins became attached to one particular patient who suffered from advanced cardiac disease, which included episodes of crushing chest pain. He watched as she came through this with remarkable peace. She told him the reason was her faith in Jesus. One day she said, "You know, doctor, you've listened to me talk about my faith, but you never say anything. What do you believe?" Collins says, "That was the most important question I've ever been asked."

He later met a pastor, who, as he puts it, "willingly tolerated my blasphemous questions and assured me if God were real, there would be answers." This pastor introduced Collins to the work of C.S. Lewis, starting with *Mere Christianity*. He writes,

I realized most of my objections to faith were utterly simplistic. Here was an Oxford intellectual giant who'd traveled the same path from atheism to faith and had a way of describing why that made sense that was utterly disarming. It was also very upsetting. It wasn't the answer I was looking for.

Dr. Collins became a Christian at age 27.

This is just an example of how one man came to faith. And it reminds me that one of the things I love about the gospel of Jesus Christ is how elastic it is. Whether you have a Ph.D. from Yale like Dr. Collins or a sixth-grade education, the message of the gospel has a way of reaching every kind of person on this planet. For Dr. Collins, it started with a question, "What do you believe?" For you, it might be something else.

If you're a person of faith, take a moment and think of your own story. How and why did you come to faith? Who was instrumental in that process? What was going on in your life to prepare you? If I could listen to each of your stories, I know they'd come in all shapes and sizes. But it would be the same message, the same story, the same gospel that changed your life.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the 16th chapter of the Book of Acts. Paul was with his friends Silas and Timothy. Luke was also with

them, and he's the one who narrates this story. They'd come to the Greek city of Philippi, a major city of Macedonia. It was here the gospel invaded the European continent for the first time.

And Luke describes three encounters Paul and his friends had with three very different people. In some ways, they're all very much alike because, in the end, they all come to Jesus, but in almost every other way, they're very different. I think they reflect the different kinds of people we meet right here in the Bay Area.

The first encounter is with a woman named Lydia. The story starts in verse 13. *"On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there."* When Paul came to a city to share the gospel, he usually started in the synagogue where Jewish people worshipped. But Philippi was a pagan city. Jewish law required ten adult males to open a synagogue. Philippi didn't meet the requirement, so the Jews would often meet outdoors to have their prayer meeting.

Paul and his buddies walked along the riverside on the Sabbath looking for a prayer meeting, and they found one as a few women were gathered. So Paul and Silas sit down and started to talk. They shared the message of Jesus Christ. They told them about his life, death, and resurrection, about how God sent his Son so we could experience forgiveness, find a purpose in life, and have a hope for the future. Maybe they answered questions along the way.

This is a good place to start. Start with a conversation. There are no bells and whistles or fancy programs. This doesn't look like a very promising start, but that's often how God works. Think about your neighborhood or your workplace. How will God start to make inroads there? The same way—just find some folks like Lydia who are spiritually curious and perhaps even searching for answers. Ask a question, like the one asked of Dr. Collins: "What do you believe?" When you do that, something else might happen.

One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us. vv. 14-15

The next step after sharing the gospel is always up to God. We often forget that. Many of us have given up expecting God to do anything. We share our faith with someone and hope we got through to them, but we don't really expect God to intervene.

But look what God does—he opens up the heart of one of these women to believe. Right there by the river, she trusts Christ. Luke tells us a bit about her. After all, this was the first convert in the Western world! Her name was Lydia. She was a worshiper of God, meaning she'd become a Jew. Luke also tells us she was a businesswoman who sold purple goods. Purple dye was very valuable, and she must have made a very good living; she had a nice wardrobe and a big house. But that didn't keep her from coming to faith, along with her entire household. They were all baptized right then and there, and she opened her home to Paul and his friends. I love how Luke says, "she persuaded us" to stay at her house. Yeah, right! Nice soft bed. Good food. Laughter around the table. Many scholars believe her home became the first house church in Philippi.

Let's think more about the kind of person Lydia was. We're told she was from Thyatira. This was in Asia Minor. Today it's the Turkish city of Akhisar. So in some ways, she's far from home. Economically, she's a wealthy businesswoman. She's like a fashion CEO with a house in Hillsborough and a posh condo in Aspen. But we also know she wasn't satisfied. She was searching, that's why she was at a prayer meeting. I think she was an intelligent woman who needed things logically explained to her. In essence, she came to Christ through a Bible study.

I'm sure Paul showed her in the Scripture how Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrifices and prophecies. When it says the Lord "opened her heart to respond to Paul's message," that means as she listened, she "got it." God had been at work in Lydia, drawing her towards a relationship, so when she heard Paul's message, it was like she found the golden slipper that fit. "Of course! I get it now. This is what I've been looking for all along."

We meet people like this every day. On the outside, it may look like they have everything. But they're searching. They're restless. I think of all the women who've come to know Christ through our Women's Bible Study over the years. Many of them appear to have it all, but they're searching, asking questions. Then someone invites them to this strange Women's Bible Study-thing. They're intrigued, and they come and start to study the Bible. Before long, it all makes sense. They get it. They realize this Jesus is what they'd been looking for all along.

But sometimes, God works in more dramatic ways. This brings us to the second encounter, where a slave girl is set free from an evil spirit. Look at what happens when Paul goes back to that same place of prayer.

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her. vv. 16-18

This woman is different from Lydia. She is on the other end of the economic spectrum. She's a slave who is powerless and exploited. She's possessed by a spirit who uses her to predict the future for people. Her owners exploit her for money.

For some reason, this girl follows Paul around and declares, "*These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.*" Why would an evil spirit give Paul and his friends a ringing endorsement? The ulterior motive was likely to discredit the gospel by associating it with the occult. The enemy wanted to derail their message by appearing to be in line with it. This went on for days. Finally, Paul gets so tired of it he cast out the spirit in the name of Jesus. It's like, "Gee, thanks for the free advertising, but would you please shut up!" But there's power in the name of Jesus, and she's set free. And the fact that her story is placed right between two conversion stories leads us to infer she came to Christ just like the others.

This second encounter is quite different from the first. This was a spectacular deliverance. She didn't need a Bible study like Lydia. She didn't need someone to explain the Scripture logically. She needed deliverance. She needed an encounter with a power greater than what enslaved her. She needed something to heal and deliver her emotionally and spiritually. She was tormented. Her life was out of control. That's where God met her.

A few years ago, when I was in the West African country of Niger, I met a woman being treated in a hospital for obstetric fistula. Her husband had divorced her. She'd been banished from her village because her condition left her leaking urine. She was dirt poor and illiterate. To make matters worse, she showed all the signs of being possessed by an evil spirit. Through prayer, she was delivered, and when she came into her right mind, we told her it was Jesus who set her free. Her smile was unforgettable.

There are people like this today. They may or may not be possessed with a spirit, but their lives have become unmanageable. They're out of control. No one has to convince them of the reality of evil. They know it. They've experienced it. Maybe, like this woman, they've been exploited. What do they need? They don't need a Bible Study. They need a powerful experience of deliverance. They need to be set free.

God can meet them right where they are at. I've seen it happen a hundred times in our Higher Power ministry. God sets a person free from addiction to drugs, alcohol, porn, prostitution, and even the occult. I hope you leave room in your life for God to show up and transform people's lives in dramatic ways. I hope you leave room for him to set people free.

But, as always, the enemy is quick to twist everything to his own ends. What was a blessing to this girl, he now uses to awaken serious opposition. In verses 19-24, the men who owned and used this girl are incensed that their "cash cow" was gone. Setting captives free doesn't make captors happy. So they went to the Roman authorities and complained. As a result, Paul and Silas were severely flogged and imprisoned. And it's here we meet a man referred to as the "jailor." He's the subject of the third encounter. He was most likely a semi-retired Roman soldier

because they often settled in Roman colonies like Philippi. He was commanded to guard Paul and Silas. He took special measures, throwing them in an “inner prison”—the deepest, darkest dungeon possible. He spread apart their legs and bound their feet in stocks.

But look what Paul and Silas did.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. vv. 25-26

This is one of those scenes that seems so crazy we almost dismiss it. Their backs were raw and bloody; their feet were bound, but they're praying and praising God. I don't know what they sang—*Amazing Grace*, *Jesus Loves Me*, *This I Know*? How could they sing? They could sing because the joy of the Lord was their strength. They could sing because they trusted that God knew what he was doing, and he would use this situation for his purposes.

In this case, it was literally true because Luke says, “*the prisoners were listening to them.*” No doubt the jailor heard them as well. What kind of impact do you think this had on them? Maybe some of them were annoyed. “Hey, quiet down in there. Let us get some sleep!” But I wonder how many of them were impressed and intrigued as they listened to these two beaten and bloodied men sing songs of praise at midnight. You never know who's listening or watching.

As they're singing, God breaks in again—literally! An earthquake thunders through the prison, the chains fall off the prisoners, and the prison doors open. Then Paul and Silas escape into the night, right? No! That's what I'd do, but that's not what they did. They actually stayed a while longer. I want to say, “Uh, Paul, when God breaks open prison doors, you might want to take advantage of it. Run!” But Paul's thinking, “You don't get it. We were always free. We want others to be free too.” You see, there was another guy in the jail that God had plans for.

The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, “Don't harm yourself! We are all here!” The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” vv. 27-31

The penalty for a Roman soldier who allowed his prisoners to escape was death. This guy knew he'd failed to perform the duties of his job, and it was over for him one way or the other. So he decides to save face and take his own life. But before he could do that, Paul shouts, “Do not harm yourself. We're all here.” For Paul, the jailer's spiritual freedom is more important than his own physical freedom.

Then the jailer asks, “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*” What did he mean by that? I mean, his life was in danger. Perhaps he's just asking how to be saved from the certainty of death. Or maybe he'd heard them singing about Jesus and another kind of salvation. That's what Paul wants to talk about. Paul says, “*Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household.*” It's so simple, yet it's this simple invitation that would change the jailor's life. What would you have said in response to this man's question? “What must I do to be saved?” Paul doesn't give him a lecture on theology. He doesn't tell him to clean up his language and stop drinking. He just keeps it simple: “*Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ...*”

Think with me for a moment about who this man is. He had spent much of his life fighting battles for Rome. He had seen in it all. Now he was slowing down a bit but still working. He was a blue-collar kind of guy, middle class all the way. He was a hardworking, no-nonsense, practical man. He was turned off by emotionalism and sentimentality. He was also turned off by intellectualism. He wasn't very religious. He was a “just give it to me straight” kind of guy. He was not concerned about whether these men were guilty or innocent. He was just doing his job. The worst thing in the world would have been for him to fail in his duties because duty drove him.

There are people like this man today. They don't need intellectual arguments for the faith. They don't need an apologetics class. They don't want to hear some sappy story about how Jesus helped you get in touch with your inner child. They just want to see how the gospel works. They want to see how the gospel can make two beaten and bloodied men sing songs in prison. He'd never seen anything like that. “If God can do that for them, maybe he could do that for me.” I've met so many men like this. They don't come to faith because of some intellectual argument or an emotional account of being healed but because they see how the gospel actually works in practical terms. Maybe their marriage is falling apart, or one of their kids struggles in a way they can't fix. Maybe they feel like they've failed. When they see how Jesus can help them in those down to earth ways, they believe.

And notice how the gospel doesn't only get hold of this man but his family as well. It's the same thing we saw with Lydia. Paul had said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and your household.” The idea isn't if he believes they'd all be saved by his faith. But rather, his belief will be so contagious they'll believe and be saved just like him.

Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household. vv. 32-34

So Paul speaks the word of the Lord to his whole family, and his entire household is baptized in the big hot tub in the backyard. I love how it says the jailer “*took them and washed their wounds.*” What a tender thing for this rugged man to do. Just a few hours before, he'd thrown them in

the cell and brutally locked them in stocks. Now he's tenderly nursing their wounds. That's how God transforms lives overnight! Then they all sit down and have a meal together, and Luke adds this little note, "*he was filled with joy because he'd come to believe in God.*" Isn't that great? Paul and Silas, Luke and Timothy, the jailer, his wife, and kids sit down together with a big spread of food. That's pure joy!

Three encounters: A wealthy, cosmopolitan woman named Lydia finds Jesus through a Bible study. A tormented and oppressed slave girl finds Jesus in a dramatic act of deliverance. A blue-collar jailer finds him in a totally unexpected act of grace that literally saved his life and his family.

It's interesting, back then, Jewish men said the same prayer each morning. He'd give thanks that God hadn't made him a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. Well, here in this story, God redeems someone from each of these despised categories. It's true what Paul would later write to the Galatians, "*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Gal. 3:28).

There are a few things we can learn about our own call to be witnesses for Jesus. First, we have to depend on God. In each of these stories, we see God at work drawing people to himself. It's God who opened Lydia's heart. It's God who delivered that slave girl from an evil spirit. It's God who cracked open that prison to not only free Paul and Silas but the jailor as well. So make no mistake: God is on the move. God is working, and you just have to show up and be faithful. And pray! He's "*the Lord of the Harvest.*" So pray he opens hearts around you; pray for eyes to see who he's drawing near to himself. Pray for boldness to say the right thing or ask the right question at just the right time.

Second, these three encounters teach us the gospel is for everyone. Don't ever say, "Well, that person would never be interested in Jesus." But here are three very different people, and the gospel meets each of them right where they were at. It set each of them free. Lydia was a slave to money and success, but she's set free and opens her home for church. The slave girl was a slave to an evil spirit and evil men, but she's set free by the powerful name of Jesus. The jailer was a slave to duty, and only when he fails to do his duty is he ready to be set free by the gospel. And since everyone is different, we need to adapt our methods.

We need to be flexible. Not everyone will come to faith through a Bible study, or through a spectacular deliverance, or through a personal failure. Yes, the gospel is for everyone, but our methods must be tailored for the individual. Evangelism is not "one size fits all." Some people need logic; others need deliverance; still, others need to see how the gospel really works in practical ways.

Third, God loves to take entire households. It was true of both Lydia and the jailor. God loves to get a hold of households, families. Forty-six years ago, God got a hold of me. Out of the blue, he just plucked me out of my family and said, "I'm starting with you." I shared him with my

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

brother, and soon he came to faith. And then we both shared him with our Father, and he came to faith. So God took a household. I think he loves to take entire households with the gospel because then they can open up their home to reach other households. We want to transform the Peninsula. How will that happen? One person at a time, then one household at a time. And then, maybe, the whole neighborhood!

Some of you are the only believers in your family. That's hard. The hardest place to be a witness is in your own home. But don't despair. God is not done yet. Keep praying. Keep showing up. God will do the rest.

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