

How People Change

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceathens.com.

The following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony.

We remained in this city for some days, and on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the people who had come together.

One who heard us was a woman named Lydia from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods who was a worshiper of God.

The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized and her household as well, she urged us, saying, If you've judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my house.

[1 : 21] And she prevailed upon us. As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her honors much gained by fortune-telling.

She followed Paul and us, crying out, These men are servants of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation. And this she kept doing for many days.

Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And it came out that very hour.

Verse 19. And when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrate, they said, These men are Jews and they're disturbing our city.

They advocate customs that are not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice. The crowd joined in attacking them. And the magistrates tore the garments off them, gave them orders to be beaten with rods.

[2 : 30] And when they inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in stocks.

Verse 25. About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. And the prisoners were listening to them.

And suddenly there was a great earthquake so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.

But Paul cried out with a loud voice, Do not harm yourself, for we are here. And the jailer called for the lights and rushed in and trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul in silence.

Then as he brought them out and said, Sir, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household.

[3 : 40] And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wombs. And he was baptized at once, he and all his family.

Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced with his entire household that he had believed in God.

Scroll down to verse 40. It says, So, this is Paul and Silas again, When they went out of the prison and visited Lydia, and when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.

It's the word of God. Such a vivid text of scripture. We get the opportunity to break out this morning. How did you come to the faith? How did you come to believe in the gospel?

One author I recently read told this moving story of his conversion experience. He said, First impressions are lasting impressions. So the saying goes, and I suspect in most cases it is to be true.

[4 : 54] My first impression of God is with me to this day, he writes. It happened to me on a musty old church camp in Canada. I was five years old.

Back in those days we were into tabernacles. I don't really know what that means, but they are tents. Not only were most of the churches called tabernacles, but our camp meeting buildings were also given this name for a tent.

On one especially hot day, my parents were in the adult tabernacle, and I, with a number of other kids, were in the children's tabernacle. The teacher was teaching us about John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, and as she taught, something sparked in me.

He says, After the lesson, the children exploded into the sunshine to play, but I lingered. Miss Brown seemed to know why. She said, Can I help you, Jimmy?

She asked gently. I nodded, biting my suddenly trembling lower lip, tears welling up in my eyes.

She said, Let's go back into the back room and pray.

[6 : 00] He said, I can't explain what happened, but I will say it like this. At five years old, I suddenly felt as though I was the worst sinner in the world. My sense of sin nearly crushed my little heart.

That prayer, though, didn't end there. It began with remorse, and then it grew into joy. I felt this newly discovered burden suddenly lifted from my soul. The presence of God overwhelmed me. Without looking for Him, he writes, without asking for Him, indeed, without any knowledge of Him, God came looking for me. A five-year-old.

First impressions are lasting impressions. How did you come to believe the gospel? Was it in a musty church pew, or after a camp sermon, or maybe in the privacy of your own home?

What happened? How did God come looking for you? How do people change? How does this happen?

[7 : 03] How does someone going all out in one direction suddenly change and go another? How come it happens to some and not to all and not to others? Our text continues with Paul's second so-called missionary journey.

He leaves out from Antioch again, which we saw a little bit at the end of chapter 15. He visits a number of the places he's gone before, and then he travels some 400 miles through Phrygia and Mysia, and he's forbidden to preach by the Spirit.

Sometimes the Spirit doesn't want you to preach the gospel. Finally, a vision appears to him, and a man from Macedonia says, Come and help me. And so that's where Paul goes. He travels to Philippi to preach the good news, and that's the look we have.

Philippi is that Roman colony, a diverse city, a city that we studied a lot last year when we went through this whole book. And if you'll notice, there's a lot of interesting things in this passage, and one of them is that the words begin to include we.

So Luke has been this writer who's only reported what he's heard and sought to put together an orderly account, but we comes out when they arrive in Philippi.

[8 : 08] And what I want us to see is it's very unique what Luke includes here. He just includes a sampling of what happens. They're there for many days, but he includes a few stories, and these stories are the few conversions, and they form, in effect, a few windows into how people change.

And I think it's incredible. So I'm excited to dive into it. Where we're going, main point, no one is too good or too broken or too far from transforming grace. No one is too good or too broken or too far from transforming grace.

So we're going to look at these windows, these pictures, these people. First, a religious woman. A religious woman.

First, Luke introduces us in chapter 16 to a religious woman named Lydia. Look down there in verse 13. He says, On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside where we supposed it was a place of prayer, and we sat down.

You see those we's? We sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods who was a worshiper of God.

[9 : 25] Paul usually preached in the synagogues, as we saw that, right? And, you know, when a city would try to form a synagogue, it had to have ten Jewish men to form a synagogue. And if they didn't have a synagogue, they would go and pray by the river.

And so that's what happens in this passage. When he knows they don't have a synagogue, he goes to the river where they might be gathered. And there gathered are not a bunch of men, obviously, but women. The first we meet is Lydia.

She's a businesswoman. She's a seller of purple goods, and from the city of Thyatira is what it says. Thyatira is a place well-known in that world for purple goods. Purple goods are for royalty. These fabrics that Lydia sells. She's an established woman. She's, I think, a well-to-do woman. She has a home, which we'll see later on.

And so she's a businesswoman that has some degree of success, but she's also a worshiper of God. She's praying with these Jewish women. She's religious.

[10 : 28] She's a convert to Judaism. She reads the Old Testament scriptures. But on this day, God does something unique in her heart. He opens her heart through the gospel.

Look down at verse 14. As we continue there, it has one of the most classic descriptions of how people change. One who heard us was Lydia.

In that second sentence, the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. You know, a number of women are gathered there to pray. A number of women are gathered there to hear Paul speak.

But the text zeroes in on this one woman, Lydia, and tells us what happened. On the one hand, it tells us that she comes to faith through the preaching of the gospel. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

She's not saved in her room alone. She's saved through the preaching of the gospel, through human lips. That is the most dominant form of how people come to get saved, how people change.

[11 : 30] And so she, too, hears the gospel through Paul's lips. On the other hand, the text says there's no immediate connection between the preaching and her heart.

So she comes to faith through the preaching of the gospel, but it says there's no immediate connection between the preaching and her heart. Notice the three verbs in that little sentence. Pay attention, said, and opened.

Pay attention, said, and opened. The first two in the Greek indicate ongoing action, and I don't know much Greek, but I know that much. They indicate ongoing action, but the third word points to something immediately completed.

So Paul's, the point is Paul's saying these things. He's out there. They're gathered to pray, and Paul begins to preach, so he's saying these things, and they're paying attention, but then suddenly, at one moment, the Lord opens her heart.

That's incredible. And she responds. She's sitting with a number of different women, and the word is being preached, and then suddenly, her heart opens.

[12 : 36] Tim Keller sums it up like this. Lydia's heart was not open because she responded to the gospel. She responded to the gospel because her heart was open. No one chooses when or where they will be born, right?

You know, we may play, you know, we do that, I don't know what I'm doing with the hands right here. I guess, you know, we play baby Mozart to our kids, you know, hoping we can form them in the womb to some genius or something like that, but we don't consult them about where they'd like to be born.

You want Star Regional, Erlanger, somewhere up in Knoxville. Well, the same thing is true for being born again. No one chooses when or where they're born again. All this happens quietly, secretly, with no help from Lydia to make clear, only God can say.

Acts 13 says, as many in Antioch, as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. So Lydia is experiencing what theologians call regeneration, a secret act of God by which God gives life.

That's what happens in this little gathering. God suddenly interrupts, not through changing what is being preached, but through entering her heart. Terrell Spurgeon tells about how he came to believe these things.

[14 : 01] He said, when I was coming to Christ, I thought I was doing it all by myself. And though I sought the Lord earnestly, I had no idea the Lord was seeking me. One weeknight, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher's sermon.

I hope that's not your case right now, for I did not believe it. I especially hope that's not the case. The thought struck me, how come, how you come, how did you come to be a Christian? I sought the Lord, he answered, but how did you come to seek the Lord? The truth flashed across my mind. In a moment, I should not have sought him unless there had been some previous influence upon my mind to make him, make me seek him.

He continues, I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, how came I to pray? I was induced to pray by reading the scriptures.

How came I to read the scriptures? I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, that he was the author of my faith, and so that the doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine, I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession.

[15:12] I ascribe my change wholly to God. I think that captures it so well. Why were you born again and not your brother or sister who lived in the same house?

What about your friends from high school? Is your life really that much different than theirs? What about your cousins or neighbors or co-workers? Is it really because you made a better choice, or is something else going on?

I love this. You know, Lydia's conversion is wonderfully quiet. There's no tears, no fears, no anxious prayers, no pleading, only understanding now where there wasn't.

One moment, darkness, and lack of understanding, the next, light. You know, many conversions in the church, I think, happen just like this. One day in Sunday school, you don't even know what's going on, and suddenly, the penny begins to drop.

Suddenly, your mother's faith becomes your own or your father's faith becomes your own, and it's less like a rebirthing experience or something like that. I don't know what that is, but, and it's more like passing from one state to another on the interstate.

[16:20] You barely notice, and if there wasn't a sign, you wouldn't know. That's the conversion I'm praying for for my kids. It's just quiet. I'll take loud, too, you know, any type, but quiet.

It's incredible. Though wonderfully quiet, her response is just awesome. She believes she's baptized. She brings her family to the Lord. The whole household is baptized. She opens her home. If you look down there with me, the very last words of that whole section in verse 16, you know, she says, if you judge me faithful, then come stay at my house, and then she prevailed upon us.

I love that. She wasn't just hospitable. She was aggressive with hospitality. You must eat in my house, and I think that's wonderful. It's quiet, but her response was loud.

Point two, a slave girl. Point two, a slave girl. The next person Luke introduces us to could not be more different than Lydia.

[17:21] Look in verse 16. As we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune telling. She followed us, crying out, these men are servants of the most high God who proclaim to you the way of salvation.

They meet her on the way back to that place of prayer, and this is a lady, a slave, who has a spirit of divination, literally a spirit of python like the snake.

The spirit is said to be controlled by a Greek god of Apollo who would overtake women and allow them to prophesy about the future to foretell things. And so she has this, not gift, she has this spirit upon her, but she's also a slave in property of her owners.

So they set her up at the marketplace and they have people come to her booth so that she can tell their stories. And I think the point that Luke's trying to make is she could not be more different than Lydia.

Lydia fears the Lord and does what is right. This slave girl is devoted to an evil spirit. Lydia works hard and has attained a status in community. This slave girl is a nothing, a slave.

[18:36] She's a freak show. I think that's what's going on. But the gospel sets her free.

Now this scene is so interesting. Paul's kind of going back and forth. He said it happened over many days and he's going to this place of prayer and I guess preaching the gospel there and she keeps crying out, these men are servants of the Most High God.

They proclaim the way of salvation. You may think free advertising, right? Getting the word out. She keeps doing this for many days.

Paul avoids her much like we avoid our long-winded neighbor or our high-maintenance friend in the grocery store. But finally, he's had enough. He's greatly annoyed.

Verse 18. Now, I think what's going on here is he's not annoyed at the girl. I think he's annoyed at the spirit within her.

[19 : 41] So he doesn't say any words to the girl, at least that are recorded here, but he does say the spirit, I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. So, on the one hand, this verse reminds us that evil and demonic spirits are real.

Our enemy is not flesh and blood merely and it's not just out there nor is it just in here. On the other hand, this verse reminds us that fighting evil and demonic experience is not complex or spooky. There's no trick or gimmicks. Paul speaks a word and declares the absolute authority of Jesus Christ and she's set free. Comes out that very hour.

Now, while Lydia is saved quietly, this slave girl is not. Jesus said, once, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.

That's probably a passage we all know. We've heard him say, since all people sin, all are slaves to sin. We are sinners not because we sin. We sin because we're sinners.

[20 : 51] We have a sinful nature. We inherited from Adam and we cannot not sin and we're unable to free ourselves from this slavery and what happens in our life. Many are slaves to acceptable sins.

Now, I put quotes because there are none. Like, too much food or love of money, a controlling drive for success and so on. Others are slaves to more unacceptable sins like anorexia, drunkenness, pornography, self-harm, substance abuse, and so on.

These unacceptable sins are no worse and no less unacceptable than the others. But these unacceptable sins seem so powerful and so unable to break.

And I think that's what's going on with this girl, Lydia. And I think that's why Luke draws our attention to her as something akin to anorexia. I have a family member who for now, probably 40 years has been anorexic.

We've tried, not me personally, our family has tried a number of things to try to help, but all the layers and layers of fear and worry and anxiety and all the layers and layers of patterns are so difficult to break.

[22 : 08] And I think that's why Luke puts this in our Bible so that we might see what God does with difficult people. This picture is placed in our Bible to remind us that Jesus is greater.

Jesus could have saved the slave girl quietly. He could have turned her heart in a moment, but Jesus saves her suddenly and forcefully to show that He is the greatest.

Some people just need the light turned on. That's Lydia. She just needed the light turned on just in a moment, but some people need to be told, wake up! That's why this is in our Bible.

You're going over the edge. Do you see the change? Do you see how you're unable to free yourself? Do you see how all your plans for immediate change don't work out?

Grab this rope! Jesus is greater. I think that's why this is in our Bible. He reigns. He's far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. There's only one name under heaven by which we must be saved and it's Jesus.

[23 : 10] And if He could save this girl in bondage, why do you think He couldn't save you?

This response, this girl's response is to me. Now we don't know a lot of what happened. I stand with a number of guys that think she was converted because the text says that the Spirit came out that same hour and it also says that her owner's hope of gain was gone which meant she didn't return to the trade and she followed Christ.

It's an incredible picture, isn't it? Point three, a Roman jailer. A Roman jailer.

After the slave girl is saved, Paul and Silas are persecuted as if this text couldn't get any better.

They're stripped, beaten, thrown into prison yet after midnight they let it all hang down.

They are praying. They are singing. They are praising God. Wouldn't you love to have been in that prison to hear their voices exalting God?

[24 : 27] There we meet a Roman jailer and he's unlike Lydia and the slave girl. He's not a moral person like Lydia nor is he a freak show like this slave girl.

He's something in between. He's a complete, I think the idea, he's a completely secular person. What I mean by that is completely worldly. His view of life is completely constrained to this world. He doesn't believe in God. He doesn't know anything about the way of salvation or Jesus Christ. But the gospel comes to him in a most surprising way and satisfies him with joy.

Look down with me in verse 25. At about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the prisoners were listening to them and suddenly there was a great earthquake so the foundation of the prison were shaken.

Immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's bonds were unfastened so the Lord is coming. Right? We've seen earthquakes before in this verse and the Lord is coming.

[25 : 30] All the doors are open. Not just Paul and Silas are freed. Everyone's set free but then the text immediately shifts to this jailer. Verse 27, when the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open he drew his sword and was about to kill himself supposing that the prisoners had escaped.

So the jailer assumes that they were left assumes he's done assumes just like what happened in Acts 12 with the guys who let Peter out he knows he will be executed for failing to keep the prisoners locked up so he plans to kill himself first instead but I think there's more going on here. throughout the night he hears Paul and Silas praying and praising God. Listen to that look at that in verse 25 the prisoners I think the jailer too were listening to them.

He becomes aware that the power joy and peace that they have he doesn't. At first he wonders perhaps what makes them different but gradually it begins to gnaw at him.

perhaps he begins to think all my efforts to climb the ladder haven't paid off. Another promotion passed me up last week.

[26 : 49] Perhaps he begins to think that all the peace and security a family is supposed to bring hasn't delivered or erased the feeling that I'll never measure up to what my parents wanted. I don't know what he began to think but so many people are going through life trying to cover up a deep sense they don't belong because they're too ugly too needy or too messed up.

And perhaps this night was not the first night he thought about harming himself. On the surface he looks like just another Roman jailer but inside he's a man on the brain. Tennis star Andre Agassi was successful is successful by any measure the trophies the money the houses yet driven into tennis by a ruthless father he could never please Agassi Agassi became quite a success but began to hate tennis more and more because of what it meant to him.

In fact he threw himself into harm's way to try to shorten his career what we don't know about Andre Agassi began secretly using meth it gave him a high yes to ease the pain but it threatened to damage him physically he said I quote I get an undeniable satisfaction from harming myself and shortening my career after decades of merely dabbling in self harm I make it now my mission I hate tennis more than ever this is Andre Agassi but I hate myself more perhaps that's you perhaps that's why you can't seem to put down the bottle perhaps it's why you keep your distance perhaps it's why you always want to be alone perhaps it's why at the end of the day you feel like a little broken boy who can't make his dad happy perhaps it's why you think about so many of these different things you think about life if you were gone perhaps it's why you're so hard on yourself and work so hard and if that's you the Lord has something for you in this passage it goes back to the jailer and let's go back there to him he readies his sword he prepares to take his life but Paul is there now you gotta realize

Paul could have left Paul should have left by now but he waits he knew God had people for him in this town look at verse 29 and the jailer called for lights and rushed in and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas then he brought them out and said sirs what must I do to be saved they said believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved you and your household and the gospel breaks into this jailer's life the gospel doesn't come quietly like it did with Lydia and it doesn't come forcefully like it did with this slave girl it comes dramatically it comes and sweeps him off his feet and satisfies him with joy look in verse 34 he says he brought him into his house he set food before him he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God I love that you know he struck by Paul and Silas rejoicing in prison and now he rejoices that he had believed in God he saw it and for the first time in his life never or didn't feel alone a 17th century

Puritan tells the story of seeing a father and son walking down the road so he's watching these two walk down the road and he said suddenly the father sweeps up the son in his arms and hugs him and kisses him and tells the boy he loves them then after a few minutes he puts him down then he wrote was the little boy more a son in his father's arms than walking beside him objectively no but subjectively and experientially there's a massive difference all the difference in the world the son knew he was the father's son but in a moment buried underneath his hug and his kiss he knew it in a different way and I think that's what happened with this jailer suddenly his heart is flooded with joy

and he realized he belongs to somebody that life man we just want to belong to somebody
[31 : 52] Tim Keller says when the Holy Spirit comes down on you in fullness you can sense your father's arms beneath you it's an assurance of who you are the spirit enables you to say to yourself if someone as all powerful as that loves me like this delights in me has gone to infinite lengths to save me says he'll never let me go and is going to glorify me and make me perfect and take everything bad out of my life if all of that is true why am I worried about anything at a minimum this is joy and a lack of fear and self consciousness at a minimum it's joy Christianity is not rule keeping drudgery it's the discover of inexplicable joy the discover of being known and yet being loved by the almighty father

Christianity is not do a couple things and stay a certain way on Sunday morning it is going down to the basement and discovering 200 proof joy passed down from generation to generation this truth this joy that Jesus described it like a man who went and he found this treasure in a field! He went and he sold all that he had he said I got to have that joy that's all I want and that's all I live for and if that's you if you feel like that jailer on the brink then I come to you I call you to Jesus Christ not merely so that your sins might be forgiven but so that you might have joy and joy in full just like the angels declared from the heavens I come to bring you glad tidings of great joy that's the you know sin but became sin so that in him we might be counted righteous and called into fellowship with this God who rejoices over his bridegroom over his beloved just as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride and that's what he found Jesus is not merely a savior he's not merely lord he's the greatest treasure in the world

I mean I wonder if Paul was thinking about this jailer when he wrote whatever gain I have I count as lost indeed I count everything as lost compared to the surpassing worth the treasure of Jesus Christ and then his response I think it's just the effortless overflow of joy he's baptized we're going to do some baptism next month if you haven't been baptized notice how quickly they're baptized right here and then he washes their wounds one preacher from the third century said he washed and was washed he washed them from their stripes and was himself washed from their sins he was one of those jailers who slapped Paul with a cane and then he's one the one the only one who washes! him clean he opens up his home he gives him food how do people change how did you change these pictures you change by grace if you change change by grace Paul his time flip with me to verse 40 Paul his time in Philippi concludes most appropriately he was there even though we read it in the day he was there for years he says verse 40 they went out from the prison and visited Lydia when they had seen the brothers they encouraged them and departed so he leaves the prison he goes back first thing he wants to do is he wants to go see Lydia there's a church in her house he wants to see him and then he waits to see the brothers you gotta understand what's going on that phrase

[36 : 17] God has brought them from death to life now they are no longer strangers they are brothers and sisters and so he waits to see him and then leaves the gospel does advance through strategy sessions and metrics that gospel advances to the continuing welcome of newly born again brothers and sisters and he departs no one is too good too broken or too far for transforming grace that's our story now let's pray father in heaven we thank you for this day we thank you for the opportunity to consider your word yet again God we I pray for anyone who would wonder whether they are in your family and in the community and the people for whom you died and spilt your blood I pray that you would draw them now by the power of your Holy Spirit let us all be like

Father who surrender ourselves wholly and completely to you you are the fountain of life in you there is life and there is no life outside of you and so we come and hide in you Lord we thank you this morning for all of us who do know you we know we know you because of transforming grace and God in the midst of this world that tosses us to and fro our confidence that we will stand is not in our decision but in the eternal security found in the death of Jesus Christ so we rest and we rejoice we thank Jesus name amen amen you've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens Tennessee for more information about Trinity Grace please visit us at