

A Roman, A Greek, and a Thyatirian went into a pub....

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Acts 16:13-34

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. ¹⁴One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. ¹⁵When 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.

Paul and Silas in Prison

¹⁶Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. ¹⁷This girl 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." ¹⁸She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled 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.

¹⁹When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. ²⁰They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar ²¹by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

²²The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. ²³After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. ²⁴Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. ²⁷The 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. ²⁸But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

²⁹The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." ³²Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. ³⁴The 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 family.

Lydia

This is me, in front of my shop in Philippi. The locals call me the Lydian woman because I came from Thyatira in Lydia (near today's Turkey) and I sell the world famous purple cloth from Lydia. So my name is both a reflection of my trade as well as my origin.

I guess you are wondering, why am I so far from home? Well, my husband died about 5 years ago leaving me his business, the cloth trade. It was a difficult time. Its hard to sell purple cloth in a city full of purple cloth. Many of my husband's business contacts did not trade with me after his death and business was so bad, we could no longer survive. It was at this time that I got particularly dissatisfied with the Greek polytheistic ideas. The idea that my life is randomly destroyed by demigods and gods just seem intellectually incoherent. It was at this time that I met with some Jewish women and learnt of their God. the One and Only Creator God who is sovereign over all things. I found the Jewish religion cogent and believable. I became what the Jews called a God fearer. You know, the Jewish religion is a strange thing. You can never become a Jew. There are no Jewish evangelist out there because you are either born a Jew or you are not a Jew. No matter how hard I tried, I can never be part of God's people, but only a God fearer.

Over time, the business got from bad to worst. Despite the kindness of the Jewish ladies, I could not survive. Out of desperation, I took my kids and a caravan full of purple cloth to Philippi, hoping that the rich retired Romans would buy my goods. The plan worked marvelously and soon I had enough capital to set up a shop and a home in Philippi. My relatives back home continued to send more cloth to me and I made clothes, drapes, curtains, and they sold like hot cakes, and I made quite a fortune. Today, I seem like a great success, but you know, just like the Jewish religion, I am an outsider here. I am the Lydian woman. I do not belong. Sometimes, I long to belong.

One Sabbath, I was by the riverside praying with several other like minded friends in Philippi, when several men came up to us. Their leader was a Jew named Paul. He explained to us that the long awaited Messiah, the anointed one of God had come in the flesh and this man, Jesus Christ, was crucified under Roman law and he was confirmed as God's anointed through bodily resurrection. That now, God's judgment for sin was once for all laid on him and all of us, Jew or Gentile can become God's children, God's people, through

Jesus Christ. We God-fearers no longer have to sit outside, rather we, just like the Jews, can become children of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

God opened my heart that day and I understood and believed. I urged Paul and his companions to stay in my house. Paul was reluctant at first, but I insisted and he agreed. Wow, I cannot tell you how much my life changed that day. My house became the center of operations for the missionaries and we became the first church in Philippi. My home was once again filled with people that I belonged with. The Roman prison guard, the slave girl, and the many brothers and sisters I have here. We belong to each other and we belong to God. I did not know it then, but God had called me to become the first pastor in Europe.

Just this afternoon, I was reading a passage of Scripture. Is 66:19-21

"I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations—to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations. ²⁰ And they will bring all your brothers, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD -on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels," says the LORD. "They will bring them, as the Israelites bring their grain offerings, to the temple of the LORD in ceremonially clean vessels. ²¹ And I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites," says the LORD.

Isaiah the prophet was talking about me. I am the Lydian, who God had sent Paul to, so that I can come to God, ceremonially clean, and even be selected to be priests and Levites. Can you believe that?

God had prophesied about me, through Isaiah the prophet, and I have become the first priest to Europe.

Python

This is me, standing at the back, in the slave market in Philippi. My parents owed huge debts and we were sold to a slave trader.

The trader brought us to mount Parnassus to the temple of Delphi. There was an omphalos stone and the trader put my sister's head over the stone just as the vapours came out, then he did the same to me. That was the last time I had any peace of mind.

We Greeks believe in many gods. Now Delphi in Greek belief is the centre of the universe and the omphalos stone at Delphi is the connection between the gods and men. The oracle at Delphi breathes in the vapours from the stone and can tell the minds of the gods. So Gaia, that is the earth mother, gave birth to a serpent - called Python - who guards the oracle at Delphi. Now the legend goes that Apollo, the son of Zeus, killed Python with an arrow and then buried Python underneath the Omphalos stone at Delphi. Delphi then became the temple dedicated to Apollo. This greatly upset Gaia and Apollo

was punished for this killing. So, we believe that if a person is suitable as an oracle, she can breathe in the vapours from the Omphallos stone at Delphi and Python's spirit (which is still under the stone) will go into the person and the person will become the oracle - able to tell the future and to earn their master a good income.

The slave trader brought all his slave girls to this place in the hope that they may absorb the spirit and become an oracle, thus greatly increasing their worth.

The vapours did nothing to my sister, but the spirit of Python entered me. It was not obvious at first and the trader thought nothing had happened. My sister and I were auctioned separately to different owners and I became the slave girl to a Roman household.

Over the months, working on the household chores, the Python spirit grew stronger and stronger. I heard voices and felt compulsions. These compulsions would overtake me leading to me speaking out or shouting out. My owners soon realized what had happened and they realized the potential for making money. First, it was for family and friends, I predicted their futures and told their fortunes. Then it was for money and I became a full time oracle. The Python is depicted in Greek mythology as a dragon or a serpent. It is not a kind spirit. The more I used the spirit the more it enslaved and tormented me.

I had horrific dreams and dark visions. I was losing my mind.

Things got a lot worse when Paul and his companions came to town. The Python Spirit was agitated and the spirit compelled me to follow them around shouting out "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved". I was like a mad woman, well, I was a mad woman. This went on for days and finally, Paul looked around and said to Python "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" In an instant, my mind was restored, and my spirit cleansed. The voices that were in my head for so many years were gone.

Now Luke does not record for you what happened to me, but let me tell you.

I was freed. For so long in my life, I have been in bondage. I have lost my freedom for so long that I had stopped believing that it was possible to be free. My mind was in bondage to the voice of Python. My spirit to the spirit of Python. My body, in bondage to slavery that I was sold into. My will in bondage to my master's desires. Even my destiny was under the bondage of Python. Yet, one command in the name of Jesus Christ, and I became free. I was freed from Python. I was free to think again, to hear again, to listen again. I searched after Paul's companions and they told me about this Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, I am even freed from slavery. Yes, I am still a slave, but I work for another master now.

My owners realized that with the Python spirit gone, their money making venture was also gone. So they dragged Paul and Silas into the marketplace to face the magistrates on the trumped up charges that they were teaching

customs unlawful for Romans to do. That is the worship of God and not the emperor.

The Roman emperor power was put into action and Paul and Silas were beaten up pretty badly and thrown into prison.

Ironically for me, I became free.

The prison guard

Oh, here is a sculpture of me during my army days.

I was in the Roman army when I was young. The thing about the Roman empire is that it is always expanding which means that for soldiers in the army, you are always in battle. My whole life has been lived in battle, when we win, we travel to a new battle zone, and more battle, more winning, and more traveling to a new frontier.

We were trained to kill, to carry out orders regardless. In my time, I killed men, women, and children. I have killed in battle and in cold blood. I have killed armed men and defenseless prisoners. I have killed strong men and helpless women. Old men and young children. When the order is to kill, or to rape, or to pillage, you better obey. In the Roman army, disobedience means death. If you do not obey your centurion, he will have 99 men left.

Yes, I feel guilt. Yes, I have nightmares about people whom I clearly should not have killed. But there is no other way. Centurions and Centurions and orders are orders in the Roman army. I know some of you may complain about your bosses, but trust me, Centurions, they are the worst bosses there are. For them no order is too harsh to give, and no punishment too harsh to be given. The hierarchy is intense. Centurions can kill you without any question for simply failing to carry out an order. It was a life of guilt and oppression. Guilt from what you had to do day in day out and oppression from great fear of what will happen if you failed to do the orders.

I was glad to retire and be settled into Philippi, a Roman colony, surrounded by some of my old army buddies, and to land a retirement job as a prison guard here. Usually, there are rarely any prisoners and the work is easy.

One day, two men were brought from the magistrate court charged with disturbing the Roman peace by unlawful customs. They were sentenced for beating and imprisonment. Beating up two men was not difficult for me, a seasoned Roman soldier. I beat them up good and chained them in stocks in the prison cell.

Around midnight, I noticed the two men were singing. Not quietly, under their breath. It was a loud joyous song of praise to their God. It was such a mismatch. My eyes looked upon two badly beaten up prisoners chained to the ground, but my ears heard two voices singing the most joyful song I have ever heard. It was more joyful than the victory songs we sang after battle. It was defiant, free. It was as if, they were free and guarding the prison and I was the one in stocks and chains. Then, suddenly, a massive earthquake struck and

the whole prison was shaken. Lights went out and dust was everywhere. I could hear the chains being loosened and the gates falling off. I knew that any sensible prisoner would have ran off and knowing that I would be tortured and killed for failing to hold onto two simple prisoners, I drew my sword prepared to commit suicide. "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" I heard from inside the prison.

I called for lights and went inside. Amazed to find these two men still standing there. Their chains were on the ground. They were free. But they did not leave. In a moment I saw freedom like I never did before. Here I was guarding the prison, thinking I was free and thinking that these two beaten up and chained men were imprisoned, when all along, they had been completely free and me, I am the one imprisoned. Even when they were in prison, when their feet were in stocks and their arms in chains, they sang joyous songs like free men. Indeed, chains could not bind their freedom. Not this kind of freedom.

I asked the two men "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered "believe in the Lord Jesus Christ" and proceeded to tell me about this savior, who is God himself, born as a man, to take up men's sins, that we may be saved. My sins and guilt has been paid for by his death, that I had to die no more. Everyone whom I have killed, every order that I should not have carried out, all that guilt and sin, has been taken care of.

I have been forgiven, cleansed, renewed. Who would have thought it, an old Roman soldier with a lifetime of sins behind him, could find forgiveness and new life in this prison cell in Philippi and that, from his own prisoners. I immediately clean and washed the wounds of my prisoners and they in turn washed me in baptism. I set food before them and served them. The guard has become a servant, and guilty has become clean, the prisoner had been set free.

Well, friends, you have heard the three stories from Philippi. But, we have to ask the question, why these three stories. Why did the author, the good doctor Luke, record these three stories for us. Obviously, these were not the only three people saved in Philippi, as it says later on that Paul and Silas met with the brothers and sisters at Lydia's house. So out of perhaps a dozen or so conversion stories, Luke records these three for us, why?

There are I think three reasons

Luke records these three stories because Yahweh God is the God of the Gentiles, because Yahweh God is the God of All people, and because Yahweh God is the God of all gods.

First, Yahweh God is the God of the gentiles.

We must not forget that these three stories occur in a particular point in Luke's book. It is Chapter 16 which comes after chapter 15 and before chapter 17. Now, Chapter 15 is the Jerusalem council, where the decision that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised to become God's people and to fellowship with God's people was made. At the end of Chapter 15, we are told that people who

read the letter of the Jerusalem council were glad for its encouraging message. Is it any surprise then that we have Lydia, a Gentile God fearer, keen and waiting to become the people of God, sitting just outside the Kingdom of God, who is the first that Luke mentions in these three stories.

In Chapter 17 onwards, we have the Jewish opposition to the gospel.

So right bang in the middle of these two chapters are these three gentile conversions. Three people from gentile background, all became saved by Jesus Christ. Surely, this is an affirmation of the Jerusalem council. This is a loud shout to proclaim that God is indeed God of the Gentiles as well as the Jews and that Gentiles belong to God's kingdom every bit as much as the Jews. Indeed, even if the Jews reject the gospel, Gentiles are pouring into the Kingdom. That is great news for us. Because as I look out here this morning, I don't see many Jews. And if God was not a God of the gentiles, woe, we would be lost indeed.

So, Yahweh God is a God of the Gentiles, and Gentiles here today, we welcome you to Yahweh God's kingdom, to be his people, to experience his love, his forgiveness and his grace.

Then Yahweh God is the God for all peoples.

John Stott points out in his commentary on this passage that the three converts in Philippi are very diverse. They are as different as people can be.

Let us look at it. Lydia, is a rich, intelligent, successful, Thyatirian woman with an intellectual search for the true God. The slave girl is a direct opposite. She is Greek not Thyatirian, She is absolutely poor not rich, she has no possessions and even lives in her master's home. She has no education, probably not particularly intelligent. She is a nobody. She is not free, she is under bondage. Her problem is a spiritual possession by the Python spirit, quite different from Lydia's intellectual search. The Roman guard, is Roman, not Greek not Thyatirian. He is middle income, not rich, not poor. He is not the one giving the orders, like Lydia, nor is he the one taking the orders entirely, like the slave girl. He takes his orders, but has some degree of liberty. His problem is guilt and fear. Fear of his superiors and guilt for what he has done. You see, he immediately washes Paul's wounds, he needs to reverse the evil he has done. That is the sign of true repentance.

Three very different people, with three very different needs and problems. Yet, one God, the God and Father of Jesus Christ, who answers all these needs. Jesus, is the answer that fits like a key to a lock, like a hand in a glove, like antidote to poison to all three cases. Why? because Yahweh God is the God of all peoples. This God, is the God that can answer your problems regardless of what they are.

Finally, Yahweh God is the God of all gods.

Three different powers are set up against Jesus Christ in these stories. Thyatira is famous for its purple cloth which brings enormous wealth. Money is the root of all evil, so it is said. Indeed, wealth easily becomes a god, carrying with it enormous powers. Thyatira purple cloth trade is kind of like the house of Versace today. It was a powerhouse of wealth and fashion. It represents wealth at its "best". Wealth is for many a god of security. Wealth is a god of power. Wealth buys you comforts, privileges, and luxuries. Yet, wealth is a false god. With the recent stock market performances, the power of the wealth god has been shown for what it really is, which is no security at all. The whole system of wealth globally has been shown to be a house made of straw and built on sand. For Lydia, she had already seen through the false god of wealth, and sought after the true Yahweh God. Yet, when she met Jesus, she found God in God's truest form, Jesus Christ. We learn later on that the Philippian church, led by Lydia, became the model for generosity, for giving in support of gospel work (2 Cor 8). In other words, after meeting Jesus, Lydia gave up her god of wealth and indeed gave her wealth to Yahweh God. Why? because Yahweh God is a far far greater God than the god of wealth. In comparison to Yahweh God, the god of wealth is not even a god. Its a nobody. Friends, are there anyone here who still cling onto the god of wealth? Let Dr Luke's message be heard then. Our God is the only God, besides him there is no other God and certainly not the god of wealth.

The Greeks are also famous for their gods. Now Python is a powerful god. Created by Gaia the mother earth. Even Apollos, who killed him, was punished for doing so. Python's spirit did not die, but lived on in Delphi, the centre of the world in Greek mythology. Yet, we cannot miss the unparalleled massive superiority of Jesus Christ in this confrontation with Python. Python clearly acknowledges that Paul and Silas were "servants of the Most High God". Isn't this strange, even the Greek gods themselves recognize that the most high God, is not Zeus, but Yahweh. So it is no surprise that with one sentence, Paul casts out this spirit of Python. Yahweh triumphs over the Greek gods, not just by a little. This is a complete thrashing. Python is no competition at all. Python merely declares Yahweh as the most high God and is thrown clear out of the ring by one sentence from his servant Paul. The message is clear. There is no other gods apart from Yahweh God. Yahweh God is the God of all gods.

Now, the Roman empire is built on its armies. Its armies is what expands the empire. The emperor cult, where the emperor is thought of as god incarnate, is based on the army system. The soldiers all believe that the emperor is god and therefore serves the emperor with their all, with their lives. Here is Paul and Silas, accused by a Roman court, for teaching customs contrary to Roman life, and beaten by a Roman guard, thrown into a Roman prison, chained with Roman chains and stocks, and guarded by a Roman guard. They are for all purposes defeated by the Roman empire machinery. They have been conquered by Rome. Tried, beaten, imprisoned, *veni, vidi, vici* indeed. Yet, one earthquake from Yahweh God and how the tables have turned. The Roman empire's power is entirely striped bare. The chains are loosened, the stocks a broken, the gates fell down and the Roman guard is preparing for suicide. The prisoners are freed. You see, it is a clear demonstration of the superiority of

Yahweh God over the Roman empire. In comparison to God, Rome is but a small insignificant blip on the radar. The mighty armies of Rome are a transient mist in front of God's breath.

Yahweh God is the God of all gods, even the god of the Roman emperor.

Yes, without doubt, Dr Luke is trying to tell us that Yahweh God is far far superior to, is unmatched by the Greek gods, the wealth gods, and the Roman gods. No, there is no other gods apart from our God. There is no one else that saves, there is no other name under heaven or earth in whom there is salvation. There is no other god apart from Yahweh.

Yahweh God is the God of the gentiles. Yahweh God is the God of all peoples. Yahweh God is the God of all gods. There is no other God than Yahweh. In yahweh alone is salvation, is goodness, is grace, is love, is peace, is joy, is hope, is life.

Friends, where do you stand today? Do you know this Yahweh God? The God and Father of Jesus Christ? Do you have a personal relationship with the God through Jesus Christ? If you don't let me encourage you, just as the Jerusalem council encouraged the gentiles. You don't have to fear, you don't have to be circumcised!! Pastor Bob is not hiding a pair of scissors in his pocket and going to snip you. No one is going to induce you in some horrific religious rite.

Just like these three people, you too can become saved. No matter what your intellectual search is, or what spirits hold you in bondage, or what guilt or sin you carry. No matter what riches or poverty you have, or what ethnic or religious background you come from. You can come. Jesus Christ has done it all already. This Yahweh God has already died on the cross for you. All you have to do is, like the Roman guard, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Are you ready to do this today?

Let us pray.