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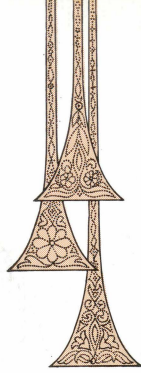
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# A Pagan Becomes A Christian



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## A Pagan Becomes A Christian

The contemporary clash between Christianity and secularism is not unlike the first-century battle between Christianity and paganism. The New Testament provides an insight into that struggle showing how Christians met the challenge of pagan idolatries. To the Greek mythological deities were added an even more confusing number of Roman gods and goddesses. Of his pagan world, Paul, the apostle, wrote, "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of corruptible man, and of birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things" (Romans 1:22, 23).

A typical pagan town of Roman stamp was the Macedonian city of Philippi, described by Luke, the author of the New Testament Acts of the Apostles "... a city of Macedonia, the first of the district, a Roman colony" (Acts 16:12). Many retired Roman soldiers settled in places like Philippi giving the community not only political and social life similar to the imperial city

herself, but also bringing the practice of Rome's pagan religions. A Roman city for more than a century, Philippi was not unlike her mother city in many ways.

But her importance for our study centers in citizens of the town who were influenced by the gospel ministry of Paul and Silas. The visit of these evangelists to Philippi occurred on Paul's second missionary journey and is recorded in Acts 16. Here they preached Christ so convincingly that a rich dye merchant, Lydia, was converted. It was also here that a young slave girl, possessed with a "spirit of divination," was freed from her demon-ridden life by these same preachers. This act of mercy, however, earned Paul and Silas the wrath of the girl's masters when they "saw that the hope of their gain was gone" (Acts 16:19). Whereupon these greedy slaveholders had Paul and Silas arrested and arraigned before the city "magistrates." Found guilty of troubling "the city" and setting forth "customs which it is not lawful for us to receive, or to observe, being Romans," the town fathers "laid many stripes upon them," casting the two preachers into prison (Acts 16:19-23). The jailer at Philippi, a civil servant of this Roman colony and, therefore, a member of Rome's solid middle class, was charged "to keep them safely" which caused him to immediately place these two servants of Christ in "the inner prison" making their "feet fast in the stocks" (Acts 16:22, 23). Roman law placed the entire responsibility for the safe-keeping of prisoners upon the jailer. In fact, the jailer was called upon to personally pay the penalty of any escaped prisoners even to the forfeiting of his own life. Prison-keeping in those days was evidently a very serious business!

These two Christians are now in the depths of the Roman prison at Philippi as the result of helping a slave girl. Charged unjustly, they have been placed in the maximum security section of the dungeon. How would you have reacted under those circumstances? Notice how these men accepted their plight, "But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns unto God, and the prisoners were listening to them; . . ." (Acts 16:25). Vile language, the curses of hardened hearts, stories of depravity — this was the customary language of the prison. But here are men praying to a God very strange to the other prisoners. Here are men actually praising their God in the midst of adversity. What an impression this must have made on all, including the prisoner-keeper!

But the unjust judgment that sent them to the Philippian prison was soon answered. As Paul and Silas sang and prayed, "suddenly there was a great earth-



quake, so that the foundations of the prison-house were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened: and every one's bands were loosed" (Acts 16:26). The opportunity of a lifetime for many of these men had come. Paul and Silas most certainly must have felt a vindication for their unjust and severe treatment. But the most perplexed and distraught man in the prison at that moment was the jailer! "And the jailer, being roused out of sleep and seeing the prison doors open, drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped" (Acts 16:27). What other course of action was open to him? Appeal to his vain gods and dead idols? Remember the greater purposes and meanings of his life? Hope for mercy before his Roman superiors? With no real meaning in his life, the devotee of a lifeless religion, with totalitarian Rome crushing any uniqueness in his own personal life, the jailer had no live alternative to suicide.

But, alas, there were two unusual prisoners in this poor man's jail that night, men who evidently exercised a restraining influence on the rest of the prisoners. At the moment the jailer was about to "do himself in," as the Romans say, "Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here" (Acts 16:28). Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that the jailer "called for lights and sprang in, and trembling for fear, fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'" (Acts 16:29,30).

This greatest of all questions, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" erupted from a heart facing very real and present danger. He had entered the prison with "fear and trembling" and now he wanted directions for his life. The jailer must have sensed the moral decay of his day. Nowhere is his pagan world more thoroughly described and its judgment more completely pronounced than by Paul in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. "The wrath of God is poured out on all ungodliness and unrighteousness," the apostle wrote (Romans 1:18). He described the first-century world's refusal to accept any testimony, natural or revealed, of God's reality. Paul finally said, "And even as they refused to have God in their knowledge, God gave them up unto a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not fitting; . . ." (Romans 1:28). All around him, even to the alleged activities of his gods and goddesses, abounded lasciviousness and impurities of all kinds. His age was morally corrupt. In his quieter moments the jailer must have known that he was living in an evil time.

This great question, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" also resulted from a sense of spiritual danger. The immorality rampant in his day, the obvious disregard for any meaningful approach to life, created a spiritual vacuum. "For the wages of sin," says the New Testament, "is death; but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Such conditions surrounding and influencing his life and that of his family created a spiritual emptiness that the jailer was unable to fill.

He also asked this momentous question out of a sense of judicial danger. How could an immoral and spiritually bankrupt age like his continue? To what good end could it come? Would not the natural law of cause and effect create havoc?

The early Christians preached the judgment of God on the jailer's world. "God now commands all men to repent," Paul declared to the philosophers at Athens (Acts 17:30,31). "The Lord wants all men to come to him in repentance," Peter wrote in his First General Epistle (II Peter 3:9). "God's righteousness has now been manifested in Christ," Paul explained in Romans 3, "men need no longer ignorantly grope" (Romans 3:21-25).

But even more importantly for each of us, Paul and Silas, under direct orders of God and guided by the Holy Spirit, answered the jailer's question clearly and quickly. "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house" (Acts 16:31). Jesus taught the apostles during His personal ministry the importance of faith in Him. "He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life; but he that obeyeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36). On the day of His ascension as He commissioned the apostles to take His message to the entire world, He said of those who would hear this message, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned" (Mark 16:16).

This was the only answer Paul and Silas could have given the jailer. As a Roman civil servant and a worshiper of pagan gods and goddesses, he had no knowledge of Jesus and certainly no belief in Him as the Christ. They rightfully said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house." The same man who directed the jailer to this kind of faith, the faith that saves, explained how one comes to such belief, ". . . for, Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe

in him whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:13,14).

The faith required of the jailer by these two preachers involved at least three important elements. First, the jailer had to come to intellectual conviction about Christ. He had to consider Jesus' claims on his life. Faith is the result of testimony, and the first step in receiving any kind of testimony is to critically examine and intellectually accept or reject it. But too many people stop at this point with Christ. James says in his Epistle, ". . . the demons also believe, and shudder" (James 2:19). A group of Jewish rulers in John 12 "believed" of Christ but would not confess their faith because of fear and pride (John 12:42,43).

To simply direct the jailer to "believe on the Lord Jesus," without presenting the gospel message or testimony about Jesus would have been pointless. This is the reason that Luke tells us in the next verse of Acts 16, "And they spake the word of the Lord unto him, with all that were in his house" (Acts 16:32). Now he hears Jesus' claims. Now he considers whether these claims are intellectually acceptable to him. Not another step could be taken in the jailer's conversion after he was told to believe on the Lord Jesus, until he had heard "the word of the Lord."

But the faith required of the jailer also calls for a decision of one's will. Upon examining and accepting the testimony intellectually, one must decide whether he will or will not follow Jesus. Many believe they can postpone this decision but it is made one way or another whenever Jesus' claims are considered. The blind man of John 9 knew Jesus and received his physical sight from Him long before he finally decided to surrender to Him and confess, "Lord, I believe" (John 9:37).

The faith that would save the jailer and his family also calls for the complete surrender of one's self. "Ye see that by works a man is justified, and not only by faith" (James 2:24). Beginning with intellectual approval and creating the absolute necessity for a decision of one's will, saving faith brings one's life into harmony with God's will and prompts one to obey Christ. "For faith is only real where there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience," one writer has said (p. 69, D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*).

The word "believe" as used by Paul and Silas to answer the Philippian jailer's question occurs almost two hundred-fifty times in the New Testament. "It in-



volves believing in a thing, message, or person to the degree that one trusts in or commits oneself to it. Thus believing in Christ is not simply accepting as true the facts stated about Him. It involves trust, an act of the will, or commitment of oneself to Him as Saviour and Lord" (p. 109, Herschel H. Hobbs, **Preaching Values from the Papyrus**).

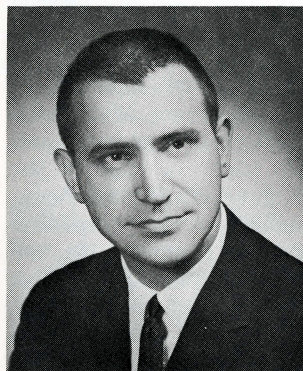
With this understanding of the faith that saves, we can appreciate the remainder of Luke's account of this notable conversion. "And they spake the word of the Lord unto him, with all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, immediately. And he brought them up into his house, and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, with all his house, having believed in God" (Acts 16:32-34).

Observe three important things about the jailer's action subsequent to hearing "the word of the Lord" from Paul and Silas. First, he indicated a change in attitude toward his former prisoners. Instead of casting them into the inner prison and making fast their feet in the stocks, he now "washed their stripes." Such a change of heart is what the New Testament suggests by the word "repentance." Jesus says, "I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish" (Luke 13:3). Peter commanded of those responding to the gospel first preached in Jerusalem, "Repent ye, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

Second, the jailer and his family were baptized immediately. Every example of conversion to Christ recorded in the New Testament ends with the new believer in Christ, who has repented of his sins, being baptized immediately (Acts 2:38; 8:12, 36-38; 9:17-19; 10:46-48). This is what Jesus wanted us to do when He commanded, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned" (Mark 16:16). Baptism is the Biblical method of initially expressing and actualizing one's new faith in Christ!

That leads me to the third observation about the jailer's conversion. Only after we see his changed and penitent attitude, and only after he and his family are baptized, do we read that they are "believers in God" (Acts 16:34). The closing verse of this great story says, "And he brought them up into his house, and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, with all his house, having believed in God" (Acts 16:34).

I hope you are now asking yourself, "Am I a believer in God?" Examine your life with this question, "Have I properly expressed according to New Testament teaching, my faith in Christ?" The story of how the pagan jailer at Philippi became a Christian was recorded in the inspired Scripture for our instruction and benefit. Carefully consider your conversion in the light of these truths from God's Word. Rewarding life here and eternal life hereafter hang in the balance.



John Allen Chalk, dynamic evangelist and long-time radio speaker, is the first full-time speaker on the Herald of Truth radio program.

He began his work with the Herald of Truth on January 1, 1966. Previously, Chalk was the featured personality in a 13 week Herald of Truth television series.

A native of Lexington, Tennessee, he began preaching at 15. Chalk and his wife and two children now live in Abilene, Texas where he spends full time working with the Herald of Truth.

He is a graduate of Tennessee Tech and has written a book, "The Praying Christ and Other Sermons" and two tracts. Chalk was nominated for the Outstanding Young Man of Tennessee in 1964 and was named Cookeville's Young Man of the Year in 1963.