

## Case Studies

This case study can be carried out as a dramatic reading followed by discussion of the questions provided at the end. Two narrators, Paul, and the jailer are needed to do this short reading.

### **Free At Last in the Inner Prison – Acts 16 A Case Study in Conscience and Conversion**

**Narrator 1** The jailer at Philippi knew about Paul and Silas. For one thing, they had been preaching in the city for a while and lots of people knew about the salvation they offered – without cost! – through the Jewish Messiah called Jesus. No doubt the jailer also knew about the slave girl miracle and the charges that were brought against the apostles. Paul and Silas probably impressed the jailer as strange Jews with strange ideas, but not much more. The little that he knew about the gospel they preached was certainly different from anything he had ever heard, but it was nothing he could take seriously. After all, he had a tough man’s job to do. The responsibilities that went with handling criminals didn’t leave a lot of room for things like mercy and forgiveness!

**Narrator 2** The jailer was a candidate for eternal life though! He just did not know it yet. The risen Lord knew it, and it was more than just revenge on the part of some angry slave owners that put Paul and Silas in his prison. It was a matter of divine providence, under the guidance of the Lord Jesus Christ. Circumstances were about to make the matter of salvation vital for the rough and ready jail keeper.

**Narrator 1** The way Paul and Silas conducted themselves had a lot to do with it. It is no fun to suffer shame for Christ’s sake the way they did. But they had the faith to know that God is in control. They did not, like other men, shout threats and curses at those who beat them. And when they were cast into prison and put in chains, they responded with prayer and songs of praise. These men were strange prisoners indeed. The fact was not lost on the other prisoners ... or the jailer.

**Paul** “I cry aloud to the LORD; I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy. <sup>2</sup> I pour out my complaint before him; before him I tell my trouble. <sup>3</sup> When my spirit grows faint within me, it is you who know my way. In the path where I walk men have hidden a snare for me. <sup>4</sup> Look to my right and see; no one is concerned for me. I have no refuge; no one cares for my life. <sup>5</sup> I cry to you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.’ <sup>6</sup> Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need; rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong for me. <sup>7</sup> Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name. Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me.” – Psalm 142 (NIV).

**Narrator 2** Are earthquakes just spasms of a mindless planet? Or does the Lord Jesus, who calms storms, also cause disasters when it is in his purpose to do so?

**Narrator 1** At midnight an earthquake shook the Philippian jail to its foundations. And it shook the jail keeper! It was exactly what he needed. If something doesn't shake us up, we may never know that we need salvation.

**Narrator 2** Cell doors flew open. Chains came loose from prison walls. And prisoners went free. As if driven by a higher power and a deeper instinct, the prisoners all rushed to the inner prison rather than the obvious freedom of the outside world. They fled to Paul and Silas whom they had heard singing and praying. They fled to the men who had peace with God, no matter what the danger or hardship.

**Narrator 1** Then all was quiet. There was nothing but the dark ... and the anxious waiting to know if the earthquake was really over. And then the sounds and a silhouette: the jail keeper was moving in the outer prison. His prisoners were gone! It would cost him his life at the hands of the Roman authorities. They'd kill him for this! There was nothing left for him but a fearful looking for judgment to come.

**Narrator 2** From the inner prison Paul heard the jailer draw his sword. The man was going to kill himself! Other prisoners must have heard it, too, but they didn't say a word. Were they willing – even glad! – to remain silent while this man took his own life? What was going on in their minds? Only the man of God intervened in that split instant to give a life-saving command. It was only the man of God who had anything worthwhile to offer:

**Paul** "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

**Narrator 1** What manner of spirit was this that shone forth from the Apostle Paul? Most prisoners would have rejoiced at the death of the hated jailer. Good riddance! But not Paul. This was the mercy and forgiveness that he preached about. This was the spirit of the Jewish Messiah who died to save all men. And now the jailer knew that these things had meaning for him. Mercy and forgiveness had become the realities of his experience in the midnight of his need! He, too, rushed to the inner prison, for he now realized that he would find his freedom there:

**Jailer** "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

### Questions

1 – How does Jesus work in our lives, in unseen ways, *before* we come into the truth?

Was Jesus at work in the life of the Philippian jailer before he learned the truth? Think of all the circumstances that came together for him, leading up to his conversion. How many can you identify?

2 – How does Jesus work in our lives *after* we come into the truth?

Think about the things that happened to Paul and Silas from the time they received the Macedonian call (Acts 16:8-10) until they left Philippi (Acts 16:35-40). Was Jesus at work in their lives? What evidence is there of this?

Was everything easy for Paul and Silas? Should they have expected it to be?

3 – What is “divine providence”? [Robert Roberts wrote a book entitled, *The Ways of Providence*, in which he answers this question and provides many examples. It is a book worth reading.] How are the ways of providence evident in the story of the Philippian jailer?

4 – Does it take an earthquake to jolt people out of sleep? Is it necessary to wait for a life-threatening experience or a crisis of conscience before a person decides to commit their life to Christ? What do you think?

5 – Some people react negatively to life-threatening experiences. The Philippian jailer almost did. Such people react as if there is no God when things go wrong, or, even worse, they blame God when disaster strikes. What is missing in the thinking of people who react this way?

6 – How important is your conduct – your way of life – when it comes to preaching the truth to others? Be specific. Do you personally know someone whose Christlike conduct has had a good effect on others? Please elaborate.

7 – See Matthew 5:16. How do Paul and Silas show us the meaning of Jesus’ words?