

# Who Belongs here?

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning, my name's Archie, I'm the pastor in training here, and we're going to be looking at Acts chapter 16, so do keep that open, it'll be really helpful for you. It's obviously quite a long passage, so do have it open in front of you.

I wonder, what's the first thing that you do in the morning? I'm sure most of us have great aspirations to be the sort of person, you know the sort of person, up at 5am, no Bible before breakfast.

No breakfast before Bible, no progress before prayer, quick workout, protein shake, 20 minutes in the latest CEO's autobiography, all before cycling to work.

I think we'd all like to be like that, the reality is, if we're not hitting snooze, the first thing we do is probably go to our phone anyway, isn't it? Probably straight on social media, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, probably depending on what age you are.

It's often the first thing I do. But I want you to imagine with me that you're a Jewish man. It's somewhere in the middle of the first century, so like 2,000 years ago.

[ 1 : 07 ] And can you imagine the first thing that you might do in the morning? Well, if you're a good, faithful Jew, you're leading your household in prayer. And we know that this is a prayer that they'd have prayed, a prayer that you'd likely have been praying would be this.

Thank God I am not a woman. Thank God I am not a slave. Thank God I am not a Gentile. That's just someone who's not Jewish. That's actually a prayer that they prayed.

And it's a prayer that gets us right to the heart of this passage this morning. A passage where Paul's ministry takes him to Philippi, where a woman, a slave, and a Gentile all encounter the gospel.

We're in this series in the book of Acts. My clicker's not working, so Dibs just going to have to do it for me. There you go. We're in the book of Acts. It's the second half of a two-part volume from this doctor called Luke.

It's written in the first century. It provides an account between the book of Luke and Acts, an account of Jesus' life, his death, his resurrection, and then the explosion of the church as he works by his spirit through his people.

[ 2 : 18 ] But the big problem for the church in the first century, we saw it in chapter 10 with Peter's vision. We saw it in chapter 15 just a couple of weeks ago with the debate in Jerusalem. The big problem, here's the problem.

Who gets in? Who gets in? And how do they get in? What is this church as it rapidly expands? What is this church going to look like? Well, we're in chapter 16 this morning.

Who belongs to this church? It is precisely who they least expected. A businesswoman, a slave, and a Gentile jailer.

And so would we be asking ourselves then this morning, who belongs here? In a church like this. Not just who would we be willing to welcome through the door.

I trust there's no one that we would turn away. But who are we really working to bring along into the life of the church? Who are we prepared to get alongside as brothers and sisters?

[ 3 : 16 ] Who are we doing life with? Is it those who we'd least expect? Look around. Who belongs here?

Let's just keep that question mulling away in our minds as we dive into this passage together. And before Paul meets these three characters, before Paul gets to Philippi, well, he has to get to Philippi.

In chapter 15 with Michael two weeks ago, we saw this watershed moment. They're still in Jerusalem. A bunch of early Christian leaders, Peter and Paul and James, they meet.

And they're trying to agree, as the gospel goes out to the Gentiles, what would be required of them. And they agree that they shouldn't be required to follow the ceremonial laws of Israel. In other words, no circumcision. And so at the end of chapter 15, Paul, he'd set out to return to the churches in Syria and Cilicia, the churches he's already visited, and share that decision with them. [ 4 : 16 ] You can catch up on all of that on YouTube or our website. But this morning, as he continues that journey, two things, I think, that we see that Paul and his pals are relentlessly committed to.

Gospel growth and divine direction. Gospel growth and divine direction. It's what they're all about. And so heading to Derbe and Lystra, there are loads of place names here. Maybe this map is helpful. There's also actually a map in your pew Bibles on the back page, which might be helpful to you as we go along as well. I find Bible maps really interesting and super helpful. Maybe you do too. But while they're in Lystra, see in verse 1 of our passage today, they meet Timothy.

And in verse 2, we see that Timothy is a guy that the local Christians, they speak well of him. And then we see in their interactions with him just how committed they are to gospel growth. Did you see it?

Did you notice it? I mean, surely you noticed it. It's the circumcision thing, right? I mean, how could you not notice that? He's an adult man. In verse 3, Paul wanted to take him on the journey, so he circumcised him.

[ 5 : 20 ] I mean, that's alarming, isn't it? And it's especially alarming given what we've seen in chapter 15, where Paul argues against circumcision.

But Paul isn't being inconsistent here because he's not circumcising Timothy for the sake of his salvation. It's not a requirement. No, we see why he does it in the rest of verse 3. Have a look at that. Because of the Jews who lived in that area. For they all knew his father was a Greek. It's not for the sake of salvation, but for the sake of sensitivity. This is their commitment to gospel growth.

See, back in verse 1, Timothy, he has a Jewish mum, but a Greek dad. And so this is for the sake of sensitivity to the Jewish sense of national pride. Misplaced though that pride may have been, He circumcises Timothy so that the Jews with whom they wanted to share the gospel would not be blinded by hatred for Timothy's mixed heritage.

This is their commitment to the gospel growing. And so straight away in verse 4, they continue this mission to carry that decision from chapter 15 to the other churches in that area.

[ 6 : 30 ] Now they're with Timothy as well. And as a result, in verse 5, have a look at verse 5, the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers. We've seen this before.

It's just another bookmark in Luke's account. As if to say, in amongst all the detail of this narrative, do you see what this is really all about? By his divine direction, God is growing his church and strengthening the faith of his people by his gospel.

And then they head west. They head west into Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey, pursuing still gospel growth. Again, you can follow that in the map behind me or in your Bibles.

But then we get these two strange instances. As if to highlight their commitment to divine direction.

First in verse 6, they're kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.

And then in verse 7, they try to enter Bithynia, but the spirit of Jesus, which I think is just another way of saying the Holy Spirit, would not allow them. And so it seems as though Paul and his companions receive some sort of divine direction from God.

[ 7 : 41 ] Indeed, Paul is then given a dream in verse 9. A vision of a man of Macedonia standing before him and begging him, begging him to come to Macedonia. And then in verse 10, have a look at verse 10 with me.

After Paul had seen this vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. Just notice briefly that Luke is now using the word we. He seems to have joined the journey at this point. You can imagine he's now got plenty of time to gather all the information that he needs to write these books. You can picture him maybe with his moleskin notebook out, gathering all their experiences.

But then see how this divine direction works. Because they conclude in verse 10 that they ought to go to Macedonia. In other words, it seems that they must have deliberated, discussed, and decided between them what to do with the divine direction that they've received.

And I think that might just be a really helpful way for us to think. As we seek to discern divine direction in our own lives, what do we feel that the Holy Spirit is saying to us?

[ 8 : 49 ] How does that measure up with what we read in scripture? And what are our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ in our lives saying? I think we often expect divine direction to be like a clear, audible voice.

Right? Loud noises, sparks flying. Or maybe on the other end of the spectrum, we just think basically it's that sound in our heads. It's what I want to do. Must be what God is telling me to do. But I think generally this is the way that it normally works. We have an intuition that the Holy Spirit is speaking to us. We weigh it against scripture and we ask for wisdom from our Christian brothers and sisters.

Through these very normal things, God is providing divine direction to his people. So Paul and his companions, they make their way to Macedonia then, which is in northern Greece.

In verse 11, we see they go via Troas and Samothrace and Neapolis. Again, check out that map if you're as much of a geek as I am. And they make it to Philippi.

[ 9 : 47 ] And three people we're going to encounter in Philippi. Thank God I am not a woman, a slave, or a Gentile. Just notice what they do when they get to Philippi in verse 12.

It's the Sabbath. It's their day of rest. And where do they go? They go to the river. Why do they go to the river? That's just where Jews met. It's where Jews met when they didn't have a synagogue because they needed the water for rituals.

We might be asking, why did they not have a synagogue? Well, you needed at least 10 men to form a synagogue. I wonder what that says about who belonged in the ancient world.

Thank God I am not a woman, they prayed. And yet, at the end of verse 13, it is the woman that Paul and his pals go towards and speak to.

This is their commitment to gospel growth. It's just interesting, I think, followers of Jesus affirmed the dignity of women in a way that was just very unusual in the first century. And one of them, see in verse 14, read it with me.

[ 10 : 53 ] One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. Thyatira was a merchant city in modern-day Turkey with a thriving fabric trade.

Lydia then seems to be living in Philippi, probably importing this purple cloth, some of the most expensive fabric in the ancient world. I guess importing it into Greece and beyond into the rest of Europe.

And next we see again in verse 14, she's a worshipper of God. That just means she's not ethnically Jewish, but she's quite a big fan of the Jewish God. And then, and I love this, see at the end of verse 14.

Then the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. We hear nothing here of how Paul shares the message. The emphasis is not on that at all, but it is clear.

It is God who stirs hearts to respond. It is God who opens blind eyes. This is divine direction that actually saves people. Maybe you're here this morning and maybe you've wrestled with your own story of how you came to know Jesus.

[ 12 : 02 ] As you read the New Testament and what jumps out at you, it's those ridiculous stories, dramatic stories like Paul on the Damascus Road. Dramatic stories like miraculous encounters with Jesus in the Gospels.

But friends, I take it this is a much more normal way of things. Do you see what happens here? Lydia hears the message. The Lord opens her heart to respond. It's hear and believe.

Hear and believe. And then in verse 15, she gets baptized. We've got a baptism service coming up soon, if that's something you're interested in. And her household, I think we can assume that the Lord has also opened their hearts to respond to the message, and they all get baptized too.

Paul's commitment to gospel growth and divine direction, it really seems to be paying off at this stage, doesn't it? And then she invites them. Do you see, if you consider me a believer, come and stay at my house.

Do you see her willingness out of her brand new identity in Christ to use what she has? To offer hospitality to her new brothers and sisters. And friends, we can do the same.

[ 13 : 10 ] Using what we have to provide for and facilitate the belonging of our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is the power of the gospel. It's starting to bring together this unlikely group of people.

Picture that group of people in Lydia's house. I mean, who belongs there? You've got Paul, this guy who used to murder Christians. You've got Timothy, a half Greek, half Jew. You've got Lydia, a businesswoman, and all the various members of her household, all united in Christ by his gospel. And while they're staying with Lydia in verse 16, my clicker just isn't working. Can you? Oh, there we go. While they're staying with Lydia in verse 16, they're heading back to the place of prayer, and they meet, see this slave girl. Thank God I'm not a woman. Thank God I am not a slave.

Not only a slave, but she also had a spirit by which she predicted the future, presumably a demonic spirit. And by that means she earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune telling.

[14:19] So not only is she a slave physically, but it seems spiritually a slave too. And when she encounters Paul and these Christians, do you see what the spirit causes her to say or to shout in verse 17?

These men are servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved. And she's right, isn't she? This is, it seems strange that she'd be right, but this sort of thing is standard behavior from a demonic spirit.

Jesus encountered a number of these spirits who knew exactly who he was and who proclaimed true things about him. And I just wonder if this is the case, that you can know true things, that you can believe them even to be true.

You can even proclaim them to be true. But maybe that's just not quite the same thing as believing in Jesus, in the good news and trusting in him with your eternity.

Can I urge you this morning to think that through, to really be trusting in Jesus, to throw your very selves at the foot of the cross this morning. For even the demons believe that it's true.

[15:34] But what will you do with that? So this situation, it puts Paul in a serious catch-22.

Whatever he does with this slave girl.

Perhaps that's why he allows this slave girl to follow them around and shout at them. In verse 18, he does that for many days. And of course, he desires that she would be free. But he's also, I think, probably worried about the implications of her freedom.

How are her owners going to respond to losing such a profitable slave? And eventually, he becomes, as our translations put it, so, or maybe you have greatly annoyed.

And I actually think that's quite an unhelpful translation, because it's not like Paul is annoyed in the same way you or I get annoyed when we get cut up at a roundabout. Instead, I think that word carries a more nuanced meaning.

It's like Paul is greatly troubled. He's grieved by what is going on. As he's caught in this catch-22, none of the options seem good to him. And then he eventually succumbs to what I guess must have been divine direction.

[16:38] And in the name of Jesus, he commands the spirit to leave. Through Paul, Jesus sets her free. I love Jesus' heart here.

Do you see it? His heart for this vulnerable, exploited slave girl. And then he sets her free. Maybe you have a heart for this sort of person too. Do you know there are more slaves alive today than there ever have been in the rest of human history?

Do you have a heart for that sort of person? Jesus desires that they would be set free. Or maybe you feel yourself to be vulnerable or exploited in some way.

Know this this morning. Jesus, his heart for you. Jesus is in the business of setting people free. And the text isn't explicit here.

But this story, it's sandwiched between these two explicit stories of conversion. And I think it's probably fair to assume then that this slave girl puts her trust in Jesus. That she becomes part of the church in Philippi.

[17:46] Thank God I'm not a woman. Thank God I'm not a slave. Picture it with me then. They're back at Lydia's place. Who belongs? Now with Paul and Timothy and Lydia and all her household.

You've got this just super vulnerable ex-slave. And who's caring for her? Who's providing for this ex-slave who's been freed from slavery and exploitation?

She's probably left to fend for herself. Useless now to her masters. Just think about how vulnerable she is. Who is caring for her? Well, I imagine it's got to be this budding community of believers, right?

Meeting in Lydia's house. Except Paul and his pals aren't going back to Lydia's, are they? Because Paul was right to be worried about the slave girl's owners.

See, in the second half of verse 19, as those owners lose their hope, they seize Paul and Silas and drag them into the marketplace to face the authorities. We'll get to our third character, the Gentile jailer, shortly.

[18:52] But just before we do, notice the swift brutality of the Roman justice system. In verse 20, they're accused of creating an uproar and promoting unlawful customs.

You know, Roman law actually provided relative religious freedom. Worship whoever you like, they said. Provided you were also prepared to worship the emperor. Which, of course, Christians, maybe even uniquely, weren't.

And so Rome was just institutionally closed to the Christian gospel. And by verse 22, the whole crowd is joining in in this condemnation.

Deb, if we could have the next slide, please. And just zoom in on the end of verse 22 with me. The magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods.

I think it's tempting when we read something like this to just sort of glance over a phrase like that.

But I want us to see this morning the suffering that Paul and Silas go through here. To really imagine it.

[19:57] Right? They're publicly stripped. Brutally beaten. It's awful. And then they're thrown into a Roman prison.

The kind of place that would make today's prisons, if you've ever seen one, feel like a hotel.

Institutionally closed to the gospel. And then we meet our Gentile jailer.

This guy is probably an ex-Roman soldier. A hard sort of man. Knows a thing or two about securing a prisoner. Right? And in verse 22, he puts them in the inner cell. And he even fastens their feet in stocks and chains.

Do you see what Luke is emphasizing? These guys are not going anywhere. It looks like that commitment to gospel growth and divine purpose has just outright failed now, doesn't it?

I met a friend for coffee earlier this week. A guy called Ali. Ali's great. He's totally committed to gospel growth and divine direction himself. And he recently just returned to teaching.

[20:59] He'd been praying about it. Seeking wisdom from friends. He'd spent quite a long time actually trying to find a job back in teaching. And after much prayer, eventually, he did get a job here in Edinburgh as a maths teacher.

And just a month into this new job, a group of girls in his class found out that Ali was a Christian.

And they started grilling him about his faith. As he tells it, they really covered every topic.

And it was as he was starting to explain what Christians believe about hell that he started to worry. The next day, he got a phone call from the deputy head teacher.

And the girls had continued their conversation in the next class. And that teacher had reported it.

And so he arrived at the deputy's office, his palms definitely sweating.

And she sits him down and explains that she's going to have to check out their code of conduct and decide what to do with him. She left him hanging. She'd be in touch, she said. It looked as though his commitment now to gospel growth and divine direction had failed.

[22:04] I wonder how you'd respond in that sort of situation. In this place that's institutionally closed to the gospel. You've been earmarked as a religious troublemaker.

And you're waiting to hear the verdict. That's the sort of situation that Paul and Silas are into. How do they respond in verse 25? They're praying and singing hymns to God.

You know, Ali told me that he actually felt surprising peace about this situation that he'd ended up in. He was incredibly grateful to God for the opportunity that he had had, even in his short time there, to share the gospel with these girls.

But Ali, he immediately started getting in touch with his Christian friends, asking them, like Paul and Silas did, to pray. Pray that the deputy and head teachers would be personally open to the gospel. Pray for that other teacher and the girls that they would be too. Pray for his job security so that he might have ongoing opportunities to share the gospel with those people. And this is the God of the universe.

[23:11] He will achieve his purposes by whatever means. You see in verse 26, read it with me. 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. And the jailer, he wakes up, he realizes what's happened and he's ready to fall on his sword. He knows that the penalty for such a neglect of his duty would be execution. Then in verse 28, Paul shouts, we're still here. We haven't gone anywhere. And so seeing this miracle, seeing in this miracle something worth exploring, do you see the question that the Gentile jailer then asks in verse 29?

Says, what must I do to be saved? Next day, Ali's back at school. It's lunchtime. He receives another phone call from the deputy.

She brings him into her office. She's now got the code of conduct there on the desk in front of her. We're going to have to get the head teacher in for this conversation. It's not looking good.

[ 24 : 18 ] In comes the head teacher. But the deputy explains, and Ali isn't getting fired. Because the deputy explains that they've all agreed, according to the code of conduct, he hasn't actually done anything wrong.

She's spoken to the girls. They didn't feel like he was forcing his faith on them. And everyone involved was actually quite impressed with his willingness to speak about what he believed. And with his sort of graciousness through the whole thing.

You see, the school might have been institutionally closed to the gospel. But everyone involved was individually open to it. So would we pray for Ali's ongoing witness to those at his school?

And would we pray for opportunities like that ourselves? And I think if we do, that even where institutions that we're involved in are closed to the gospel, whether that's at work or your school or the gym you go to, the football club, the local choir, whatever it is, wherever you are, even if it is institutionally closed, would we invest in relationships and pray that we might see personal openness to the gospel?

Pray that people would ask the same sort of question as the Gentile jailer. Do you see what he's asking? What must I do to be saved? The Roman Empire may have been institutionally closed to the gospel, but do you see the personal openness here?

[ 25 : 42 ] And do you see the beauty in the way that Paul responds? What does he say? Believe in the Lord Jesus. What must I do?

He doesn't say, here's what you must do. He says, look at the man that's already done it all for you. In verse 22, they share the word of the Lord with him.

Maybe you're here this morning and this is what you need to know. Maybe you're not a Christian and you want to know what it means to be a Christian, to be saved. Maybe you are a Christian and you've slipped into that familiar pattern.

You're here this morning feeling distant from God, feeling a sense of guilt, of inadequacy, thinking that if you can just clean up your act, you know, read my Bible a bit more, pray a bit more, turn up to church a bit more often, shoehorn myself into that spiritual place as we sing together.

If that's where you're at, well, you're really asking, what must I do? And Jesus says, look at what I've done.

[ 26 : 50 ] Living the perfect life in your place, dying in your place, trust in me, look to my righteousness, see my relationship with the Father. All that I have is yours.

Look at what I've done. So the jailer, he and his whole household, they respond to this incredible good news. And so in verse 33, they're baptized.

Just notice the order of events there. The gospel is proclaimed. It is responded to in faith. And then they are baptized. And as they go to the Gentile jailer's house and share a meal together in verse 34, and they're free.

Right at the end of the passage then, they return to Lydia's house. Who belongs here? Thank God I'm not a woman. Thank God I'm not a slave.

Thank God I'm not a Gentile. Let's go back to that scene in Lydia's house. Who belongs? You've got Paul, the guy who used to murder Christians.

[ 27 : 57 ] You've got Timothy, the half Greek, half Jew. Lydia, a businesswoman, all the various members of her household. You've got this vulnerable ex-slave, the hard man, Roman soldier, and all the various members of his household.

And I want you to imagine this conversation with me. We don't know that this happened. I'm making it up. But imagine Lydia has a young teenage son. And he's in complete awe of this Gentile jailer hard man.

And so as the jailer walks towards him, he has no idea what to say. And so he asks the awkward question, right? The small talk. So what brings you here? I heard the message about Jesus, and I believed.

What about you? I heard the message about Jesus, and I believed. Conversations all over the room. I heard about Jesus, and I believed.

Earlier this week, a Christian friend of mine, she works for a church as well, and she was sitting in Starbucks on her lunch break. And when this guy, he came in, and he sat just uncomfortably close to her.

[ 29 : 04 ] And this guy, he could not have been more different from her, just like the way that he dressed, the way that he carried himself. And as she sat there, he was eating really loudly, as she put it, and she was just getting increasingly uncomfortable and annoyed.

But then as she got up to leave, she realized that this whole time, he'd been sitting there reading the Gospel of John. And she was just so convicted that she got chatting to him, and it turned out that he was heading to a Bible study that evening.

He'd never been to one before. And someone had said that he should start reading the book before he went. He was the last person that she'd expected. Just so different to her in every way.

And so for us, even as I stand here, I wonder when we say people are welcome in this church, do we really mean welcome if...

Welcome if you're like us. Or yes, you're welcome, but you can only come so far. How do we bring people into belonging with us?

[ 30 : 12 ] What barriers do we put up? Not just in terms of welcoming them into the building, but are we prepared to go out of our way to do life, to bring into belonging those Christian brothers and sisters who are just very different to us?

Who belongs here? Well, as Paul puts it, as he writes to the Galatian church, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Friends, in Christ Jesus, we belong here. I heard about Jesus and believed. What about you? What about you? How do you do?

What about you? What about you? What about you who believe to be called a Witness quare es or a jungle hell South?

A Brah plain you can find the telling things you can find you who you