

Jesus can change anyone

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[0 : 00] Well, we are all very different people, aren't we? I'm not asking you to look around at those around about you, but as I look at you, you are all very different. Some have got beards, some don't have beards, some have got hair, some have got good fashion sense, others, well, you've all got good fashion sense, but it's just different, different styles, different clothes, because we're all different.

But it goes deeper than just what we look like on the outside, because we all come from different backgrounds, we belong to different places, we have different families, we've got different personalities, we've had different life experiences, we do different things, different jobs, different hobbies, we also have different interests.

We're all different, and we know it. We're all different. And so when it comes to Christianity, we might think that it is only really a certain type of person who can become a Christian.

Or certain people tend to be prone towards Christianity, more prone towards Christianity than other people. Or that some people are more likely to become Christians than other people are.

Whether that's because of their background, or their beliefs, or their behaviour, we might be tempted to think, well, that person is a more likely candidate to become a Christian than, say, that person over there.

[1 : 26] But what we see in our Bible reading this afternoon is that Jesus can change anyone. And so you don't have to be a certain type of person to become a Christian.

Because what we see in Acts chapter 16 are three people whose lives are transformed by the good news of Jesus Christ. They're three very different people. They have three very different backgrounds.

And so we have three very different testimonies of people coming to faith in Jesus. And they're part of the church in a place called Philippi.

Now, Philippi, we're told, was a Roman colony. And it was a leading city of the ancient world. And so as the gospel of Jesus Christ spreads to the ends of the earth, which is the key phrase we've used for our study in the book of Acts, as the gospel spreads to the ends of the earth, we see how it impacts cities, and then how it transforms and changes individual lives of the people who live in those cities as they hear the good news of Jesus.

And so what we've got this afternoon are really three beautiful stories, testimonies, case studies that display the transformative power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[2 : 43] And that's the message that the church has. The church has a message that changes people's lives. It's changed yours if you are a Christian believer.

If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, then the message of Jesus can change you, no matter what your background or your past has been. And so the message this afternoon should encourage us, if we are a Christian, because if there's someone that we think of or someone we imagine could never become a Christian, Jesus can change them.

And if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, then we're glad that you're here, then this message should challenge you, because if Jesus can change anyone, then of course he can change you.

And so let's see this afternoon as we look at how Jesus changed three people. Three people. First of all, a religious woman. Second, a slave girl. And third, an indifferent man.

Religious woman, a slave girl, and an indifferent man. So first of all, let's look at the religious woman. How did Paul and his missionary team meet this woman?

[3 : 50] Well, it's there in verse 13. 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 woman who had gathered there.

Now, the fact that they went out to the river suggests that there wasn't enough people to form a synagogue, place of worship. But among this small group of praying women, we're introduced to a lady called Lydia.

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

And so what we get is a mini case study of this woman, Lydia, and how she comes to Christ. So a few things about her. Lydia was wealthy.

She was a dealer in purple cloth from Thyatira. And Thyatira was famous for its expensive purple dyes. So basically, Lydia was a businesswoman.

[4 : 54] And she owned a home big enough to host the mission team because she invites them to stay there in verse 15. Lydia was also fairly religious because she was a worshiper of God.

We're told that in verse 14. And this probably means that she was a Gentile God-fearer or that she was a Jewish convert. But whatever she was, Lydia wasn't a Christian believer.

And yet she became one. Well, how did she become one? We read there that the Lord opened her heart to respond to the message of Jesus.

There at the end of verse 14, the Lord opened her heart. And not only was she converted, but her whole household was converted too.

Because they came to believe in Jesus, signified by the very fact that they were baptized. And notice there's no great drama with Lydia's conversion.

[5 : 53] It's pretty unspectacular, actually. She becomes a believer as she listens to Paul proclaim the message of Jesus. And the Lord used this to open her heart and transform her life.

And that's how the Lord still works today. He continues to open people's hearts, the hearts of men and women, people like us, to respond to the message of Jesus.

He draws people by his Spirit through his word to saving faith. And so even if this seems unspectacular from a human perspective, it is how the Lord transforms lives.

And so we should never limit the power of the Lord to open people's hearts. He can do it for anyone. Anyone who may seem so resistant to him, he has the power to break through and break in.

And so we are to share the message of Jesus like Paul did. That's our part as Christians. And we trust that he will do the rest. The Lord will do the rest.

[7 : 05] And it is a joy to see this happen in people's lives. I've had the privilege of seeing this happen here at Christ Church Glasgow for some of you. Where your story is the story of how you've come along and you've heard the message of Jesus from the Bible.

And the Lord has opened your heart so that you now believe in him. It's brilliant. And there may not have been any great drama. It may seem unspectacular.

But there has been a great change in your heart. Because by the Spirit of God, your life has been transformed. And with Paul, this took place down by the riverside.

With us, it might happen as the message is proclaimed on a Sunday at church. It may happen as it's discussed in our community groups through the week. Or it may happen across a coffee table as the Bible is open and shared one to one.

Whatever it happens and however it happens, it is the Lord who opens hearts to respond to the message of Jesus. And so if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian and you're hearing God's message about Jesus today, is your heart open to respond?

[8 : 23] Are you ready to believe in Jesus? Well, before we move on, if you would call yourself a Christian, just look at what Lydia did after she was converted.

Because when the Lord opened her heart and she believed the gospel, what did she do? She opened her home for the gospel. She invited Paul and the missionaries to stay in her house.

Because of what the Lord had done for her, she wanted to use what she had for the Lord and for his people. Which is what always happens when somebody is genuinely converted to Jesus Christ.

Transformation of the heart impacts the whole life. It's got to. Because when hearts are opened, well, homes are opened for hospitality, and families are opened for friendship, and bank accounts are opened for generous giving.

Because as the gospel of free grace sinks into our hearts, then it makes us generous people. As we discover that our homes, our possessions, our money, our resources, our time, have all been given

to us by God in the first place.

[9 : 34] And so because they belong to him, then we're to use them for him. To spread the gospel further and wider. Just like Lydia did in Philippi.

And so that's the first case study, Lydia. And it is a hugely significant one. Because as we zoom out and see the bigger picture, just as Lydia's heart was opened up to Jesus, and her home was opened up for Jesus, so was continental Europe opened up to Jesus.

She, I think, was the first convert in Europe, where we are today. The gospel of Jesus Christ spreads and changes people's lives. So that's the first case study, Lydia, the religious woman.

Secondly, second case study, is a slave girl. Well, who's she? Verse 16 tells us, Once when we were going to a place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future.

She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune telling. Okay, so this girl was socially oppressed because she was a slave, and she was spiritually oppressed because she had this spirit.

[10 : 46] Literally, it says a python spirit, so it's not a good spirit. And her owners took advantage of her to make money for themselves. And so she needed to be set free from her human bondage to her human masters, but she also needed to be set free from her bondage to the spirit that mastered her.

And now, as you read this woman's story, sorry, this girl's story, the contrast between her and Lydia could not be any greater.

They are at opposite ends of the social spectrum. They are at opposite ends of the spiritual spectrum because, well, Lydia was a rich, wealthy businesswoman. She was a poor slave.

Lydia had social standing, and she was powerless. Lydia was religious, and this girl wasn't just irreligious, she had an evil spirit in her.

They could not be more different, economically, socially, spiritually. It's like the CEO of a highly respected company who wears Gucci suits, who carries Prada bags, who lives in Kelvinside, who drives in Aston Martin, and who eats at the Gamba seafood restaurant.

[12 : 04] In contrast to a teenage prostitute who's been used, who's been abused, who's addicted to drugs, who's got nowhere to call home, who's hanging out in the city centre begging for money.

But both Lydia and the slave girl needed Jesus to transform their lives. And the good news is that Jesus did transform their lives.

And we also need Jesus to transform our lives. So let's just focus in then on how this happened for the slave girl. Verse 17, She 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.

So while what she said was true, verse 18 says, She kept this up for many days. Finally, Paul became so annoyed that he turned round and said to the spirit, In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her.

And at that moment, the spirit left her. So despite her saying the right thing, she had the wrong spirit. That's why Paul commanded the spirit to come out of her.

[13 : 14] Paul wanted people to hear the gospel message of Jesus, of course. That was his priority. And he's concerned also for this girl. And in one command, in the name of Jesus, she is set free from her bondage.

And what happens to her, the slave girl, is far more dramatic than what happened to Lydia. Luke doesn't explicitly mention her conversion, but the fact that her story comes after Lydia's conversion and before the Philippian jailer's conversion means that we're probably meant to assume that she was converted and her life was transformed too by Jesus.

And it happened differently. But Jesus transformed both of these women's lives. Lydia, through the Lord, opening her heart and the slave girl, through the Lord, delivering her from this bad spirit.

And so that's why we should never think that some people are more likely to become Christians than other people. because conversion is always a work of the Lord.

Jesus can transform anyone. So it doesn't matter if you're respectable and religious or if you're desperate and demon-possessed or anything in between.

[14 : 37] Because the respectable religious people need Jesus as much as the social outcasts need Jesus. Jesus can set free from any power that enslaves or oppresses any individual.

Whether it be from a spirit in Philippi back then or even still in some places or from some other kind of enslavement to sin.

In a place like Glasgow today, Jesus has the power to set people free. Free from alcohol, from drugs, gambling, harmful sexual desires, pornography, abusive behavior, bad language, or whatever it is.

Nothing can have so strong a hold on a person that Jesus can't set them free. And perhaps you are feeling oppressed, perhaps you are feeling overwhelmed or enslaved by some power or another right now.

Well, you too can be set free by Jesus. No one is ever too far gone. No one is ever too trapped. No one is ever too oppressed or too lost that Jesus can't change them by releasing them and setting them free.

[15 : 56] And because the transformative power of Jesus is so radical, there is always some kind of upheaval.

Either for the person whose life has been transformed by Jesus or for the people round about them. And you see this in how the slave girl's owners aren't happy with her transformed life.

Why? Why? Well, because they're losing money. Look at verse 19. When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face their authorities.

You see, when Jesus changes somebody, it doesn't just impact the person he changes, it impacts everybody round about them. And not everybody sees a transformed life of someone as being a good thing.

Surely you'd think a girl abused and possessed, being released and transformed is good, but not for everybody. And the reason is, of course, that our culture, any culture back then or now, just can't cope with the kind of Christianity that radically transforms people's lives.

[17 : 12] Of course, our culture can always cope with a bland, vanilla version of Christianity that just keeps everybody happy. Births, christenings, baptisms, weddings, funerals, and so on and so on and so on.

Hatches, matches, and dispatches. Give us those if you're the church. That's fine. Make us happy. Keep us happy. But don't be doing anything that will really radically transform somebody's life. It's too far. It's too much. Too fundamentalist. And yet, when Jesus transforms somebody, there's always some disturbance. There's always some upheaval. And sometimes, our culture just will not tolerate that kind of Christianity.

Because the world will always oppose the true message of Jesus. The freedom that Jesus brings is too disturbing for our individual lives.

It's too much of a threat for our society. And yet, it's needed. So we see a religious woman, first of all. We see a slave girl, secondly.

[18 : 20] And we see an indifferent man. So the Philippian jailer is this third case study that we get here. And he is different again, obviously, because he's a man.

But what is his story? Well, his life was neither a success, like Lydia's, nor a mess, like the slave girl's. He wasn't religious, nor was he possessed by a spirit.

He was just a hardened jailer, a brutal man, indifferent to Christianity. And there's no indication that he was spiritually seeking, like Lydia, nor any indication that he was in spiritual turmoil, like the slave girl.

He probably didn't care, like many of your mates today. So what? You believe? I don't really believe. I don't care. I don't mind too much what you do, what you think, but it's not for me.

I'm just not really interested. Don't even bother talking to me about it. What's on TV? You see, this man, despite his seeming indifference, was converted too.

[19 : 30] Jesus transformed him, somebody like him. So how did it happen? Well, look at verse 25. About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

So Paul and Silas had been stripped and beaten with rods. Their backs were probably oozing with blood, but they're in jail. Their feet are fastened to the stocks, and they're praying and singing hymns to God.

Tertullian, one of the early church fathers, said in his commentary on this, he said, the legs feel nothing in the stocks when the heart is in heaven.

So Paul and Silas had this joy that was so deep that even pain and suffering and imprisonment couldn't rob them of this joy.

And surely the jailer noticed this. It is an unusual way to cope with a difficult situation. Surely he was able to see what was going on.

[20 : 32] But then this earthquake shakes the prison and gives the prisoners a chance to escape. And the jailer just assumed that they had escaped. Why wouldn't you? I mean, if you're in prison, the door's open, you go.

And that's why the jailer was about to kill himself, because prisoners escaping for the jailer was a really, really, really, really bad day at the office. If they left, he had to die.

But while Paul and Silas had every right to escape, they stay put, along with everybody else. And so verse 28 says, but Paul shouted, don't harm yourself, we are all here.

And that saved this jailer's life. Even though he was the brutal man who put their feet in the stocks, the kindness of Paul and Silas surely disarmed him.

Because these men couldn't just praise God in the midst of their suffering, but they were also willing to repay evil with good. And this hardened and indifferent man had surely never seen anything like this before in his life.

[21 : 40] The credible Christian witness of two men who could praise God even in the face of suffering. And so we read verse 29, the jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell, trembling before Paul and Silas.

He then brought them out and asked, sirs, what must I do to be saved? Whatever had happened, the jailer realized he had to do business with God.

God had literally rocked his world. And his world was literally crumbling all around about him. God woke him up, shook him, if you like, out of his indifference.

And so no matter what he understood, he clearly knew he needed to be saved. As if Paul and Silas tell them exactly what to do, verse 31, they replied, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household.

And he was saved that very night. And his whole family were saved too. Verse 32, then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.

[22 : 51] At that hour of the night, the jailer took them and washed their wounds and immediately he and all his household were baptized. The 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 household. So the Philippian jailer's conversion was different again.

But as Lydia's heart being opened resulted in her home being opened, this man's new faith in Jesus is also displayed in a practical way.

He has just been washed clean by Jesus. His sin has been forgiven, symbolized in the water of baptism. And so his spiritual washing, his cleansing results in him washing the wounds of the very people that he put in prison.

And it's just a beautiful picture of how this hardened, brutal, indifferent man had his life transformed by Jesus Christ. And so these three people become the core group of the church plant in Philippi.

[24 : 05] And it is hard to imagine a more disparate group of people. They could not be any more different. But their stories are fantastic because they're stories, testimonies of how they came to Jesus.

And it shows us how the gospel of Jesus Christ transforms any kind of person, no matter who they are. Now, you may not be a religious businesswoman.

If you are, great. You may not be a demon-possessed slave girl. I hope not. I'm sure you're not an indifferent, brutal jailer. Instead, you might be a staunch, atheist, academic.

You might be a frazzled young mum with just no time to think about Christianity. You might be a believer struggling with same-sex attraction. You might be a secure and comfortable professional person.

Secure, no worries at all. You might be a desperately scared, unemployed man looking for a job.

You might be a young believer who has misused God's good gift of sex.

[25 : 21] You might be a retired teacher exploring Christianity because you want to find out more. You might be an anxious young student confused about your identity.

Or whatever else you are, whether racially or socially or economically or spiritually, the point is the good news of Jesus is for everyone and Jesus can change anyone.

Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, who was a Welsh preacher last century, he wrote a book called Preaching and Preachers and in it he tells this story of how one time he was speaking at the Oxford University Christian Union Mission and it was in 1941 and he preached on the Sunday night in a church to a congregation that was full of students and he preached to them, he said, as he would have preached anywhere else and there was an opportunity after his talk for questions from the students and then a bright young man in the front row got up.

Apparently this young man was a law student, they always are and after paying the man some compliments saying how much he enjoyed the sermon, saying how much it was just of benefit to him, he said there was one great difficulty about the sermon, something about the sermon that perplexed him and left his mind in confusion as a result because he said the sermon could equally well have been delivered to a congregation of farm laborers or anyone else and then a student sat down and there was an uproar of laughter in the room and then Lloyd-Jones responded by saying this and I quote his words, I had regarded undergraduates and indeed graduates of Oxford University as being just ordinary common human clay and miserable sinners like everybody else and held the view that their needs were precisely the same as those of the agricultural laborer or anyone else.

I had preached as I had done quite deliberately and again, this provoked a good deal of laughter in the audience and so the point is no matter who you are, whether an elite academic or a manual laborer, our human condition is the same.

[27 : 44] We are all sinners in need of a savior. We are all separated from God because of our sin but the good news is God has sent Jesus Christ into this world to be our savior.

And so this new church in Philippi tells us that the church, any church, will welcome you, whoever you are. Its doors are open for you, whatever you have done.

God has opened up the way of salvation for all who will believe in Jesus Christ. And so there is nothing to stop you or anyone else from being included into the family of Jesus.

Paul says, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. That is just how fantastic Christ's church is because God brings different people, diverse people together as part of his family.

And so can you see how incredibly relevant this message from God's word is to every single one of us this afternoon? And especially if you don't yet believe in Jesus.

[29 : 02] So maybe you're thinking, I'm just not the Christian type. They maybe are, but not me. It might be good for them, but it's not for me.

Or, there are so many reasons why I could never become a Christian. Far too many to even start going into.

And you might think that you are such an unlikely prospect for a convert to Jesus Christ. Either because of your family or because of your background or because of your culture or your lifestyle or your life choices or whatever it may be.

But here's the thing. No one is more suited or less suited to being a Christian than anyone else. Those who are Christians know we are not a Christian.

I am not a Christian because I am smarter than anyone else or better than anyone else or more likely to become one than anyone else. We as Christians are nothing more than sinners who have been saved by grace.

[30 : 14] And look at the lengths that God has gone to to reach out to people like us. He has sent his only son into the world that he loves to give us this free gift of salvation.

And if you're here today and you don't know this salvation in Jesus Christ can you see the lengths that God has gone to to even get you here to actually turn up on a day like today when you hear this message?

Because the good news is that Jesus is for everyone and can change anyone. And he wants you not just to hear it but to respond to it by believing in Jesus.

You've got to do that in order to be saved because we all deserve God's punishment for our sin. But when Jesus came to die on the cross he came to take the punishment for our sin away from all those who believe in him.

So don't ever think that Jesus can't or Jesus won't change your life. The Lord can open any heart like he did for Lydia.

[31 : 32] The Lord can deliver from any power like he did for the slave girl. And the Lord can fill any life with joy like he did for the Philippian jailer.

And that's good news isn't it? Let's pray. Let's pray.