



Chapter 16: The God Who Opens Hearts

‘What must I do to be saved?’

BIG IDEA: The gospel advances not just through open doors but through the Spirit's sovereign leading — doors close, hearts open, and a prison becomes the birthplace of a church. Where God wants the gospel to go, nothing can keep it out; and where God wants a heart to open, no chain can hold it shut.

THE GOSPEL OF GRACE: The Jerusalem Council settled the doctrine — we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus. Chapter 16 shows that settled gospel traveling: the very decrees from Jerusalem (16:4) are being hand-delivered to the churches. Grace settled in a boardroom in Acts 15 now walks a Roman road in Acts 16.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE: Acts 16 demonstrates that the gospel crosses cultural thresholds as effectively as geographical ones, transforming everything it encounters. God actively reaches beyond existing boundaries, using divine guidance and even imprisonment as instruments of mission. The Spirit directs the witness of Jesus's followers throughout these events, reinforcing that missionary advance depends on attentiveness to God's agenda rather than human strategy alone.

“Acts compels us to ask, and keep asking, what *God* is doing in our churches and our lives. At times the voice of God prevents believers from going the wrong way (e.g., 16:6–8), and at other times the divine call seems surprising (e.g., 8:26, taking Philip away from a growing new congregation in Samaria and to the desert).”

Steve Walton,
“Acts,” in *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey*

CIRCUMCISION COMPROMISE? (Acts 16:1-5)

- Paul returns to Lystra and finds Timothy — a young man of proven reputation, half-Jew, half-Greek, likely a convert from Paul's first visit (when Paul was stoned there).
- Paul circumcises Timothy — not for salvation, but for access to synagogues. This is flexibility for mission, not compromise of the gospel.
- Paul delivers the decisions (decrees) of the Jerusalem Council, and the result: "the churches were strengthened in the faith ... and they increased in numbers daily" (16:5).

Why Paul circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3)

- **Timothy's mixed heritage created a barrier to sharing the gospel with Jews.** His mother (Eunice) was a Jewish believer, but his father was Greek, and the Jews in Lystra and Iconium all knew it. To the synagogue community, Timothy would be seen as a Gentile or worse, a Jewish child of a mixed marriage who had neglected the covenant sign.
- **The gospel was not at stake.** Circumcision was treated as cultural custom, which Paul considered a matter of indifference ("Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything" (1 Corinthians 7:19; Galatians 6:15).
- **Consistent with Paul's stated method.** "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews" (1 Corinthians 9:20). Paul adapted customs freely wherever adaptation cost the gospel nothing.

Why Paul refused to circumcise Titus (Galatians 2:3-5)

- **Circumcision was demanded as a test of the gospel.** False brothers slipped in to spy out their freedom in Christ, wanting Titus, a Greek, circumcised to satisfy Mosaic law. Here circumcision functioned as a term of justification, not a custom.
- **Yielding would concede the Judaizers' premise.** Had Titus been circumcised, it would have signaled that Gentiles must become Jews to be fully accepted, a denial of the "truth of the gospel" itself (Galatians 2:5).
- **Titus was the exhibit.** An uncircumcised Greek standing in full fellowship was a living demonstration that Gentile liberty had been secured; circumcision would have voided the precedent.

The one-line takeaway:

Paul circumcised Timothy to remove an obstacle to the gospel; he left Titus uncircumcised to remove an obstacle in the gospel.



CLOSED DOORS AND A CALL (Acts 16:6-10)

- Twice the Spirit denies: forbidden “to speak the word” in Asia, no entry into Bithynia. The greatest missionary in history is told *no* — by God.
- At Troas, the vision: “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” The gospel crosses from Asia to Europe.
- Luke joins the story here (“we” begins, 16:10). The narrator becomes an eyewitness.
- Key insight: Guidance often comes through closed doors. Paul’s “no” from God was not rejection — it was redirection. The Spirit sets the agenda for the mission (the theme of our whole series).



CONVERSION 1: CARDIAC SURGERY (Acts 16:11-15)

- Philippi: a Roman colony, a mini-Rome, few Jews, no synagogue — only a "place of prayer" by the river.
- Lydia: a worshipper of God, a successful businesswoman dealing in purple cloth — religious, moral, praying — and yet still unreached until God acts.
- The key verse of the chapter: "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul." (16:14).
- Salvation is God's initiative from start to finish. Lydia was seeking, but seeking does not open hearts — the Lord does.
- The first convert in Europe is a wealthy Gentile woman — grace crosses every line. Her hospitality opens her home as the church's first beachhead in Europe.

CONVERSION 2: CONFRONTING A DEMON (Acts 16:16-24)

- A slave girl with a spirit of Python (divination), possessed and economically exploited by her owners, shadows Paul, crying the truth: "These men are servants of the Most High God."
- Paul is deeply annoyed (16:18) and casts the spirit out in the name of Jesus. Truth spoken by the wrong kingdom is still unwelcome noise.
- Her owners' complaint is not about theology but about profit: "Our way of business is gone." Idolatry has an economy, and the gospel bankrupts it.
- The mob stirs, magistrates tear their clothes off, Paul and Silas are beaten with rods and thrown into the inner prison, feet in stocks, publicly humiliated, illegally punished, for doing good.

CONVERSION 3: CAST-OFF CHAINS (Acts 25-34)

- At midnight, in the inner prison, with backs bleeding and feet in stocks — Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns to God, and the prisoners listen. Worship before deliverance, not after it.
- God answers with an earthquake: foundations shake, doors open, chains come loose — the same God who opened Lydia's heart now opens a prison.
- The jailer, ready to kill himself, asks the greatest question in the book: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"
- The answer that anchors the whole series: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (16:31). Not perform. Not earn. Believe.
- He washes their wounds, is baptized with his household before daylight, and rejoices "with his entire household that he had believed in God."
- The three portraits of Acts 16: a religious merchant (Lydia), an oppressed slave girl, and a hardened Roman jailer. Different stations, different wounds — one Savior. Grace is not for a category of people; it is for the whole city.

Convert	Ethnically	Economically	Spiritually	Event
Lydia	Asian	Wealthy	A God-fearer	Public exposition
Slave girl	Native Greek	Poor	Tormented by evil spirits	Dramatic exorcism
Jailer	Roman	Blue-collar	Practical and indifferent	Powerful miracles and example

Timothy Keller, *Church Planter's Manual*

CITIZENSHIP AND A CHURCH PLANTED (Acts 35-40)

- The magistrates want a quiet release. Paul refuses: "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens." This is not spite; it is protection for the infant church, so no one dares touch Philippi's believers again.
- The magistrates apologize. Paul and Silas visit Lydia's house to *encourage the brothers* — the church that started with an open heart and some women at a river now has "brothers" to encourage.
- Philippi will become Paul's dearest church (Philippians), a church born in prayer, praise, and a prison.

Delivered from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of his beloved Son

- The Gerasene demoniac — Jesus cast a legion of demons (Mark 5:1–20)
 - After the exorcism, the man was found sitting, clothed, and in his right mind. When Jesus got into a boat to leave, the man begged to go with him. Jesus instead told him to go home to his own people and tell them how much the Lord had done for him. The man went away and began proclaiming in the Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him.
- Mary Magdalene — Jesus cast out seven demons (Luke 8:2)
 - She became a dedicated follower of Jesus, supporting his ministry financially, witnessing his crucifixion, and being among the first to see the empty tomb and witness the resurrected Jesus.

Traditional morning prayers for Jewish men

In a series of morning blessings (*Birkot Hashachar*) recited upon waking up, found historically in the Talmud, a Jewish man recites three sequential blessings, thanking God:

- "...who has not made me a gentile (non-Jew)."
- "...who has not made me a slave."
- "...who has not made me a woman."

FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM ACTS 16

1. **God's guidance includes closed doors.** The Spirit's "no" to Asia and Bithynia was the road to Europe. Trust the redirections.
2. **Grace opens what willpower cannot.** "The Lord opened her heart." Salvation is God's initiative from beginning to end.
3. **The gospel reaches every station of life.** A merchant, a slave, a jailer — no class, gender, or past stands outside the reach of grace.
4. **Worship and prayer come before deliverance.** They sang at midnight before the chains fell. Praise is not the response to rescue; it is the posture of the rescued.
5. **Suffering with joy is the church's credential.** The beating, the stocks, and the songs gave birth to the healthiest church Paul ever planted.

☐ Next: **Acts 17** Paul preaches in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens (the Areopagus).