

Urban Legends – Part 10

Salvation-Part Two

Acts 16:30-31

Urban Legend.

The Context.

- *Acts 16:16-31*

- “Believe” is a tagline.
- Repentance and commitment are his response.
- The jailer is our spiritual ancestor.

Application.

- **The evidence of belief is action.**
 - *James 2:14-19; 2 Peter 1:10-11*
- **Introducing people to Jesus takes time.**
- **God is already at work.**

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Urban Legends¹ Salvation Part Two: Acts 16:30-31

An urban legend is a commonly circulated myth that is not true, but it gets repeated throughout the culture so often that it comes to be believed as true.² We are not going to talk about urban legends like Bigfoot or UFOs or the Loch Ness monster, but in our summer sermon series, we *are* exploring some of the urban legends that exist around certain Bible verses and even in church history.

Today we are continuing with an urban legend that we looked at last week, and it comes to us from a passage in the Book of Acts. You may recognize the story when you see it, but it took place when Paul and Silas had been arrested and were in prison, and it's a conversation with their jailer. This is what it says:

(The jailer asked,) "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They *(Paul and Silas)* replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." (Acts 16:30-31, niv)

You might wonder what the misunderstanding or misapplication might be from this Scripture; it seems pretty cut and dried. But here is...

The Legend:

All you have to do is say you believe, and you are saved. Or, all you have to do is get someone to say they believe, and then they will be saved.

If we're going to figure out why we can't use this story to come up with that legend, what are we going to have to look at? Yes! We are going to have to look at...

The Context.

¹ Sources for this series/sermon:

David A. Croteau and Gary E. Yates *Urban Legends of the Old Testament* (B&H Academic, Nashville TN 2019)

David A. Croteau *Urban Legends of the New Testament* (B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2015)

Michael Svigel and John Adair *Urban Legends of Church History* (B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2020)

Richard P. Thompson, *Acts: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. Alex Varughese, Roger Hahn, and George Lyons, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2015)

Eric J. Bargerhuff, *The Most Misused Verses in the Bible* (Bethany House Publishing, Bloomington, Minn., 2012)

Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997)

John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Phil 4:13

² David A. Croteau, *Urban Legends of the New Testament*, xiii.

Let's look at what's going on in and around this verse and what the culture was so we can get the context, and understand what the passage actually teaches us about our salvation.

I think to start, it might help for you to hear the whole story, so even though it is a bit long, I'd like to read it to us. Would you be willing to stand with me as I read this? Standing will help you and I concentrate a bit better, so we don't miss too many details. Thank you! Here's where the story of Paul and Silas' imprisonment starts:

Once when we were going to the 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. 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." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

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 the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. 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. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

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?"

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then 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. (Acts 16:16-31, niv)

This is the Word of God for the people of God, so we say, "thanks be to God!"

You have been so great to stand – thank you, you may be seated.

There is a lot that we need to make note of if we're going to get the proper context of that event and get the correct understanding of what happened (and what didn't happen) when the jailer got saved. I'm going to walk us through the story, so you might want to leave it open in your Bibles as we do.

The story starts with Paul, Silas, and some other believers ministering in Philippi. They were headed to pray together at the synagogue when they came across a slave girl who was possessed by a demon that enabled her to do fortune telling. The girl's owners exploited this girl's torment by using her to make money, playing on peoples' superstitions and popular beliefs. It sounds like they made a lot of money off of this poor girl.

So the girl starts following them around; in fact, the original language says that she was constantly "under foot." But Paul and his entourage put up with her for quite a while. As they are walking around attempting to minister, she shouts out to the people all around, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." That sort of sounds like a good thing, like she's validating what Paul is doing. And it sounds like Paul just finally got irritated and cast out the demon. But actually, her announcement isn't that helpful. She's actually using a term for "God" that is a generic term for any god that people in that polytheistic culture would have used for any of their gods. And when she says, "the way to be saved," she is literally saying, "these men are showing you "A" way to be saved," implying it is one path among many. So in other words, she kept saying, "These guys are telling you about one of the many gods, and are going to tell you one of the many ways to be saved." The message of the demon through this girl would lead to people misunderstanding the Gospel message. Paul was being patient, but Paul finally confronted her because he saw that she was doing harm and bringing confusion to the new converts. It wasn't just because he was annoyed or impatient. So Paul confronts the demon, not the girl, and he does so under the power of the name of Jesus, not in his own power. The demon has no choice but to leave the girl because of Jesus' power.

But, as you saw in the story, suddenly the slave owners' source of income is gone, and they are furious and they react. Their first accusation is that Paul and Silas are Jews. There was a great deal of racism against Jews; the citizens of this Roman colony were very patriotic and wanted to maintain their purity of Roman-ness. They felt these immigrant Jews were outsiders who were a threat to their way of life, and like all Jews who crossed their borders, Paul and Silas were creating social chaos and confusion. So the first charge that the slave holders bring against Paul and Silas is that they were Jews, and this immediately gets the crowd on their side. Then they accuse Paul and Silas of "unlawful customs," which is interesting because there's no mention of Paul and Silas promoting *any* customs. That probably means that the slave owners had to make something up in order to get revenge for losing their source of income. But think about it – when Paul cast out that demon, he

exposed the falsehood of their religion and threatened their economic structure that was connected to it.

So without any formal legal proceedings, the city officials go straight to punishing them by flogging them and then imprisoning Paul and Silas. A Roman flogging was often enough to kill a man, but then they were put into prison. Paul and Silas were placed in the most secure part of the prison – deep inside in the inner cell where it was pitch black so no one could see their way out if they tried to escape. They were also placed in “stocks,” which were used to both confine them and torture them. There were several holes to lock the prisoners’ feet in place for maximum security and pain. Despite all the pain, blood loss, and exhaustion, Paul and Silas are singing and praising God even to midnight. God responds by sending an earthquake that not only knocks the doors off their hinges, but knocks loose the chains that held Paul, Silas, and all the rest of the prisoners. Luke, the author doesn’t give any details about how this happened – it was obvious that God did it. Luke focuses more on what happens next with the jailer.

The earthquake wakes up the jailer. Remember that the prisoners were in the inner cell where it was dark, and the jailer couldn’t see in there, so he thinks they’ve all escaped. He knows that his punishment for their escape will be death – probably crucifixion, so he plans to fall on his sword and kill himself. Paul calls out to him from the dark and tells him not to do it – but again, they were still in the inner cell, so Paul wouldn’t have been able to see that; God probably gave Paul some divine insight into what the jailer was about to do. The jailer is shocked that the prisoners are all still in there, so he calls for lights and rushes in and falls before Paul and Silas.

Think about that: Paul and Silas are the prisoners and are in the dark, but they see clearly what is going on. The jailer is in the light but needs lights to see what is going on. They are the prisoners, and he is free, but he bows before them, begging to know how he can be saved!

Some say he was asking advice from them on how to avoid being put to death by the Romans. Others say he wanted to know how to be converted to their God. Either way, Paul follows God’s lead and pointed the man to the Gospel.

And here is where we run into the urban legend. The jailer asks, “What do I have to do to be saved?” And Paul responds, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved – you and your household.” What’s missing from Paul’s Gospel presentation? Pretty much everything! This man doesn’t know who Jesus is. Paul doesn’t explain the man’s need to repent of sin, there is no confession or commitment involved. So is that really all it takes to be saved – just to believe in Jesus? Is that all it takes to lead someone to Jesus – just tell them all they need to do is believe in Jesus?

Clearly there are some things missing – there is more to conversion than just acknowledging that Jesus is real.

So let’s take it apart. The first thing we realize in the context is that...

– **“Believe” is a tagline.**

Do you know what a tagline is? It is a term that is used with businesses and organizations: “A tagline is a short memorable description that succinctly and clearly communicates the brand message.”³ Let me give you an example from our church: Our mission is to Introduce People to Jesus Christ, Equip People with a Faith that Works, and Live as People with Purpose. Or, more simply, “Love.Learn.Live.” “Love learn live” is an abbreviation of our mission – it is a tagline. It is a shorter version of our mission that, taken by itself, doesn’t mean as much. But when you know the mission, you know the tagline means a lot more. Or maybe this example: my wife, Shelly, is the Career Connected Learning/CTE Graduation Pathways Coordinator at ESD 105. If you are not familiar, “ESD” stands for “Educational Service District 105.” The state of Washington is divided up into nine Educational Service Districts, so Shelly coordinates the career pathways in colleges and trades for all 25 school districts in ESD 105. But “ESD” is like a tagline that doesn’t mean a whole lot if you don’t know what it stands for and what it means.

So when Luke, the author of Acts says that all the jailer needs to do is believe in Jesus, that phrase is like a tagline that means a whole bunch more than that. The Jailer *needed* to understand more than that for him and all of his household to become Christians. But also, Paul wouldn’t have simply left it at that. Luke is making some assumptions when he writes this, we as readers *already know* what “believe” means – that there is much more to it than that. If you’ve read everything in Acts up to this point, you know that it takes more than that to be saved. Luke starts out the book of Acts writing *all* that’s involved in belief, and with each telling he writes fewer details, assuming that we already understand by this point. So “believe” is not an oversimplification of the Gospel; it is a tagline for it. We also know there was more to it, because in verse 32 it says that Paul and Silas spoke the Word of the Lord to the jailer and all his household.

We also know there was more to it than just to believe, because of what the jailer does to respond to the Gospel. He didn’t just say, “OK I believe now!” Actually...

– **Repentance and commitment are his response.**

We know this because in verse 29 we’re told that the jailer bowed before Paul and Silas – a posture of humility and repentance, and then in verse 33 the jailer brings them into his own home and he treats injuries to Paul and Silas – the very wounds that the jailer caused! He repents of his former actions, and he does what Jesus would do – serving and washing their wounds.

So there is much more to salvation than just “believe.” And thankfully the jailer understood that, because...

³ <https://www.feedough.com/tagline-meaning-examples-ideas-how-to-guide/>

– **The jailer is our spiritual ancestor.**

This jailer is the first converted person recorded that wasn't a Jew, and he wasn't a Gentile who was studying the Old Testament. Every other Gentile up to this point in Acts who got saved were called "God fearing Gentiles," or were Gentiles who were also seeking God (like the Roman Centurion in Acts 10). But this jailer was the first truly Gentile to get saved. So in a very real way, his is the first of our faith; we are all spiritual descendants of his!

So clearly there was a whole lot more to being saved than just believing. So what is the...

Application

...for us? What can we take away from this that will help us? Well, one thing is something we talked about last week, too...

– **The evidence of belief is action.**

You can say you believe in Jesus, but if your life doesn't back it up by the way you live and by introducing people to Jesus, then I don't know that you are saved. In fact, if all you've got is faith and no action, your faith may not be enough to be saved. The Bible says this:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. (James 2:14-19, niv)

Faith without action is dead. And did you catch that last part? If simply "believing" was enough, then all the demons of hell, including the one that Paul cast out of that slave girl, all the demons of hell would be saved. *They* believe, and what they know causes them to be afraid of God!

If your faith doesn't make a difference in the way you live – your priorities, your values, your behaviors, your actions – and if you are not introducing people to Jesus, I would question if yours is a saving faith.

That's why the Apostle Peter challenged us with these words:

"So, dear brothers and sisters, work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen. Do these things, and you will never fall

away. Then God will give you a grand entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:10-11, nlt)

Don't let there be doubt in anyone's mind; work hard to prove that you are saved. So, again, the evidence of belief is action. But here's something else to realize...

– **Introducing people to Jesus takes time.**

That's why standing on the street corner yelling at people that they are sinners, or yelling at sinners with your social media memes, those things rarely result in anything other than people turning even farther from God than they already are. The discipleship process starts long before someone responds in faith. When you are introducing someone to Jesus, make sure you are developing a relationship with them, and when they ask, you can explain what the Gospel is and why it is so important. Don't be in a rush, but don't put it off either. It takes time. By the way, in October our Core 104 class will be offered that teaches you how to introduce people to Jesus. Watch for it!

But you don't have to be in a hurry – you can take your time when you are introducing a friend to Jesus, being careful to explain things thoroughly with your life backing up your explanations. And remember...

– **God is already at work.**

God was at work in that person's life long before you showed up. God has been setting the stage for you. God was at work in that jailer's life, lining it up so that he was the guy who imprisoned Paul and Silas. God did that knowing that Paul and Silas would live out their faith in front of the other prisoners and the jailer. And then God set the stage with the earthquake. When you begin introducing someone to Jesus, God has already been at work in their lives setting the stage for your arrival. And, you may end up setting the stage for someone else. You don't have to convince, convict, or convert anyone! That's the Holy Spirit's job, not yours. Live out your faith, and then tell people the Gospel – the Good News that God loves us so much that he entered our world and our suffering, he died on the cross for us and rose from the dead, so your life is transformed – you are the proof that Jesus is alive and changes lives! Do that, and you will get the opportunity to help people come to faith.

Let's pray.

Communion is the opportunity we have to affirm our faith in Jesus, and to declare that he suffered and died for us, and to commit that we are willing to sacrifice our lives for him.

The Communion Supper was instituted by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is a sacrament – a sacred moment and a sacred mystery, which proclaims Jesus' life, His

sufferings, His sacrificial death, and resurrection, and the hope of His coming again. It declares and shows the Lord's death until His return.

The Supper is a means of grace in which Christ is present by the Spirit. In other words, it is a method through which God delivers his grace to us. Because of that, it is to be received in reverent appreciation and gratefulness for the work of Christ.

You do not have to be a member of this church to join us in communion. If you have truly repented of sin and trusted Christ and are committed to him, you are invited to participate. If you are not a Christian, well, you can do this too; you aren't going to be struck by lightning or anything. But truthfully, it is going to help open your eyes to your own sin and make you realize that you need Jesus. The fact that God himself gave his Son to die for you is a holy, holy thing, that you are not spiritually capable of consuming. All it will really be for you is some bland bread and warm juice; it won't be the blood and body of Jesus for you like it is for believers. Unless you want to make this your declaration of faith...what better way to do it than with communion!

We come to the Lord's table that we may be renewed in life and salvation and be made one by the Spirit.

Invite ushers to deliver the elements to us as we sing.

In unity with the Church, we confess our faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Say that with me....

And so we pray:

Holy God,

We gather at this, your table, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who by your Spirit was anointed to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, set at liberty those who are oppressed. Christ healed the sick, fed the hungry, ate with sinners, and established the new covenant for forgiveness of sins. We live in the hope of His coming again.

And so, we gather as the Body of Christ to offer ourselves to you in praise and thanksgiving. Pour out your Holy Spirit on us and on these your gifts. Make them by the power of your Spirit to be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the Body of Christ, redeemed by His blood. Amen

On the night in which He was betrayed, He took bread, gave thanks, broke the bread, gave it to His disciples, and said: "This is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, broken for you, preserve you blameless, unto everlasting life. Eat this in remembrance that Christ died for you, and be thankful.

Take now the bread.

Likewise, when the supper was over, He took the cup, gave thanks, gave it to His disciples, and said: "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me."

The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, shed for you, preserve you blameless unto everlasting life. Drink this in remembrance that Christ died for you, and be thankful.

Take now the drink.

By your Spirit make us one in Christ, one with each other, and one in the ministry of Christ to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

And now, as our Savior Christ has taught us, let us pray: (Here the congregation may pray the Lord's Prayer)

Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Stand and sing together as the worship team leads us.