

Misunderstandings about Acts 16:31

About 2000 years ago, the apostle Paul (with his co-laborer Silas) answered a frightened prison guard's question, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" He answered simply, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household." Since then, that simple answer has generated debate about its meaning. Here are some common misunderstandings of Acts 16:31.

Misunderstanding #1: It conveys an adequate gospel message for anyone. Are Paul's words enough to save any person? Yes, if that person knows who He is believing on, what it means to believe, and what he is believing on Him for. No, if that person has incorrect information about who Jesus is, a wrong view of what it means to believe, and a wrong view about his need for eternal salvation. What Luke records for us in Acts is a summary description of a certainly longer story. Paul's words are the culmination of one night of interaction with the jailer. Other accounts in Acts show us what Paul and the first apostles typically taught (e.g., Acts 2:23-24, 36; 3:18-20; 4:2, 10; 5:29-31; 10:39-40; 13:29-30; 17:3; 26:22-23) and we see further examples in their epistles (e.g., Romans 3-8, 1 Cor. 1:18-24; 2:1-2; 15:1-4; Gal. 3:1; Phil. 2:8-9; Col. 2:12-14; 1 Peter 1:3, 18-21; 3:18). Luke reports that Paul and Silas at least prayed and sang hymns and the prisoners listened (v. 25). The point is, the jailer most certainly heard more than "Jesus saves." But since the immediate context doesn't tell us all that the jailer heard, the broader context of Paul's pattern of preaching the gospel suggests it. The jailer would have probably heard about who Jesus is, what He did about man's lack of righteousness, that He rose again, and that He promised eternal life to anyone who believes. He heard enough to know that he needed eternal salvation. Evidently, what the jailer did not hear or did not understand is what he had to do. After all, his question was not about the person or work of Jesus Christ, but about what he must now do to obtain salvation.

Misunderstanding #2: It is an insufficient condition for salvation. Verse 31 emphasizes that there is one simple condition for salvation. Paul answers the simple question "What must I do to be saved?" with one simple condition—*believe*. Some might say that either Paul was not entirely heard or understood by the jailer or even that he neglected to share the correct way to be saved. Some would say that repentance is needed in the sense of sorrow and/or turning from sins, that sins must be acknowledged and forsaken. Luke does not record that Paul says anything about turning from sins. Luke only reports Paul's emphasis on the simple condition of believe. It is possible that Luke did not record everything Paul answered. But if Paul mentioned repentance in relation to salvation, we know it was not in the sense of turning from sins as a condition. Paul, like other New Testament authors) understood repentance as a change of mind or heart, a new inner orientation that is distinctly separate from the resultant outward conduct (See *GraceNotes* no. 22 about repentance). The jailer certainly had a change of mind and heart about something. Others might say that Paul's use of *believe* really means *submit*, but as we will see this is a poor handling of the text.

Misunderstanding #3: It is a demand to submit to Jesus Christ as Master of one's life. Those who teach this error argue that Paul is telling the jailer to "believe on" (by which they mean submit to) "the Lord Jesus Christ" (by which they mean *Jesus as Lord, or the Master of one's life*). There are many problems with this interpretation. First, to believe (*pisteuō*) does not mean to submit. It means to be persuaded or convinced that something is true and trustworthy. Also, to "believe on" (or "in," *eis*) has the same saving efficacy as "believe that" or to simply believe God's testimony about Jesus (e. g., John 5:24; 8:24; 11:42 with 45; 14:11 with 12; 20:31; Acts 16:34; Rom. 4:3; Titus 3:8; 1 John 5:1, 5). To believe on may emphasize the person of Jesus

Christ, but it is not a special way to express submission to him. This leads to another problem: assuming that Paul's use of "Lord" is also a demand for submission. Paul was using the common title "Lord" (*Kyrios*) that often identifies who Jesus is (though sometimes is not used: e. g., Acts 8:5, 35; 9:20; 13:38). It is both a title of respect and a reference to His deity. The very same term in plural form is used in verse 30 when the jailer addresses Paul and Silas as "sirs" (plural *kyrioi*). When used with Jesus, *Kyrios* denotes not only respect but recognition of His deity (note v. 34, "having believed in God"). There are many aspects of deity besides Master (e. g., King, Creator, Protector, Provider, High Priest), so it is arbitrary to insist that Paul was telling the jailer to submit to Jesus Christ as Master of all of his life. If we demand that the jailer relate to Jesus as Master because of the title *Lord*, then we should also demand he relate to the other terms *Jesus* and *Christ*. Since *Jesus* is His human name and *Christ* speaks of His role as the One Chosen by God to bring salvation, the Jewish Messiah, then we should insist that the jailer also comprehend and submit to the implications of Jesus' humanity and Jewish messianic theology. But Paul does not demand or expect such theological sophistication from a pagan Gentile soldier. Paul was using "Lord" respectfully and objectively for Jesus' position, not subjectively as a personal demand for submission. For example, an American may refer to the Commander-in-chief of the United States as "the President" or even "my President," but not submit to any or every aspect of his authority. The jailer's submission to Jesus as his Master should be an immediate logical and/or emotional response to God's saving grace depending on what he knew about Jesus' commands and desires for his life. The question we must ask is how would a pagan Roman soldier know what is involved in submitting to Jesus as Master of all of his life and could he have learned all that with his single interaction with Paul and Silas? As an unbeliever, he was dead in sin, therefore his request was for eternal salvation. At that moment we would not expect him to respond to God's free gift of grace by submitting his life, for he had not yet experienced that grace, and grace by its very nature cannot be earned by one's submission anyway.

Misunderstanding #4: It is a promise that a believer's whole family will also be saved. In a first-century patriarchal society, respect for men and the head of the household would greatly influence everyone in the house. So when Paul preaches to the jailer's household (usually comprised of family and servants), they also believe and are baptized. But just as the jailer had to believe for himself, so must each member of the household. Salvation always depends upon the personal response of faith in Jesus as one's Savior (John 3:16; 5:24; 14:6; Acts 4:12). One person's faith is not efficacious for any other person. Jesus even taught that faith in Him will sometimes *divide* families (Matt. 10:34-36). Paul tells the jailer he will be saved if he believes, and those in his household will be saved if they also believe (this is the same promise for Cornelius's household in Acts 11:14). That is why Paul preaches the gospel to everyone in the household (v. 32). The jailer quickly submits to baptism and then rejoices because he "believed in God with all his household" (vv. 33-34). Each person in his household also believed in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and therefore was also baptized.

Conclusion

Acts 16:31 is a simple statement in a straightforward story of salvation that emphasizes belief as the only condition for salvation, the only thing a person must do. The object of belief is the Lord Jesus Christ, the divine Savior chosen by God to accomplish the work for our salvation through His death and resurrection. There is no demand to turn from sins or to submit to Jesus as Master of one's life. It is clear that each person who would be saved must believe in this Jesus for eternal salvation. Having experienced the grace of God, those who believe should then submit to the Lord's will for their lives.