

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
First Sunday after Epiphany, January 9, 2022

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 126, 373:1, 375, 372, 377.

Lessons: Genesis 15:1-6, Acts 16:16-24, Mark 16:14-16.

Sermon Text: Acts 16:25-34.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

To begin today, we might ask “how do you get to heaven?” You probably have answered that question many times: You get to heaven by faith in Jesus Christ. OK. Is this going to be another boring sermon about things we already know?

But not everyone knows how to get to heaven. Not everyone has heard the plain Word of God on that subject. Not everyone knows that it is through faith in Jesus Christ that we can have hope of something better even in this world. And you, of course, as a child of God, have the command to ***“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.”*** Mark 16:15 (NIV2011) It is that Gospel of Jesus Christ that gives hope.

Paul and Silas were in Philippi, as you heard in our Epistle lesson, and a false accusation had led to their being severely beaten by the authorities and thrown into prison. But because of their mistreatment and persecution, because they suffered as Christians, we find the answer to the question

“WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?”

- 1. An unbeliever in fear of his life asked this question.**
- 2. What is the answer? It is faith, not great deeds which save his life – and eternally at that!**
- 3. Although it took an earthquake to wake the jailer up, sometimes God gives us more gentle reminders.**

Paul and Silas were thrown into prison and the jailer was ordered to guard them carefully. We might ask ‘How would we react to being thrown into jail like this – false accusations and being beaten by the authorities and locked up this way?’ We might react with anger, demanding “our rights” or demanding a lawyer and surely complaining.

But look at what they were doing: ***“praying and singing hymns to God.”*** They knew, of course, that God was watching over them, guarding and keeping them, and if they should lose their earthly lives, they knew what would happen to them. They would go to heaven to be with their Lord Jesus Christ forever. But we also read that ***“the other prisoners were listening to them.”*** What a marvelous witness! Would we be such witnesses for Christ under such difficult persecution?

One Bible scholar writes about the details this way: Here you have “these two disciples, with their backs aching and bleeding from the merciless whipping, with their legs cramped in the instrument of torture, [the stocks], and their minds [stinging] with the sense of injustice which they had suffered, [who] were able to put all thoughts of the torture aside and to pray. And in prayer they even got the necessary strength to sing hymns to God, to praise him in psalms. Paul and Silas were singing, and the other prisoners were listening It was a service of praise and thanksgiving such as [has] been rarely seen in this world, the first one of many similar ones held by Christian martyrs in the dungeons. But suddenly a great earthquake rocked the prison, with such force as to shake its very foundations. And as a result of the shaking not only were all the doors opened at that same moment, but also the [chains] of all the prisoners were loosened, taken off. The Lord of the Christians is stronger than the enemies that attempt to murder his servants. It is an easy matter for him to save [those who] are his own.”

An earthquake would be especially scary while being locked up and unable to move, locked in the stocks. This earthquake set everyone free, not just Paul and Silas.

“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.” He intended to commit suicide; because death was commonly the penalty for allowing prisoners to escape. The jailer thought his life was over and saw no way out except suicide. Is that so unusual for many people today? When something bad happens in their lives, they may see no way out except to end their lives, perhaps never having learned or not remembering that there is always hope through Jesus Christ. In this particular case, we know exactly why he wanted to take his own life.

There are a number of campaigns in the world today to help prevent suicide. We’re told to listen carefully and take seriously any threats or even any talk of suicide and encourage the speaker to seek help. Paul offered the greatest possible help. He reacted with the Word of God. ***“Paul shouted, ‘Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!’”***

Not one of the prisoners had made an attempt to escape, though there was nothing to hinder them. We don’t know why, but many think that that the behavior of Paul and Silas had impressed them. Perhaps many of them saw a connection between the prayers of the apostles and the earthquake, and were moved to admire the almighty power of God.

We then read that ***“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?’”***

When the jailer asked the question, he was probably thinking about how his own life on earth was in danger. He, like most humans, thought and asked “what must I do?”

The jailer addressed them with the Greek word most often translated “Lord”, using the plural form, which is here translated “sirs”. Did he superstitiously think they were some kind of gods although they had been beaten and imprisoned? Paul and Silas did not accept the title “lords,” but pointed the jailer to the one true Lord and Master over all, in whom alone there is salvation. Faith in Jesus Christ delivers from death, hell, God’s anger and judgment, and brings eternal salvation.

But Paul gives him an answer far more important than just how he could save his life on earth for perhaps a few more years. Paul gives him an answer that will save his life for eternity.

Paul doesn’t just tell him what he must do, Paul doesn’t just tell him what deeds or works he must accomplish. He didn’t have to perform some great deeds. Instead of doing something, he had only to trust. He had only to believe, and Paul tells him what and whom to believe in. Paul gives him an answer that will hold true for all eternity, not just until the morning.

Paul and Silas ***“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.”*** Paul now had a special, personal opportunity to tell him and all in his household the message about Jesus Christ, the Savior.

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” Sounds pretty simple, doesn’t it? But this is not a good deed or a good work he has to do. It isn’t even something we can do by ourselves. We cannot work faith or earn faith. With Martin Luther we confess in the explanation to the Third Article of the Apostolic Creed: “I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” God saved us through the work of Jesus Christ and God gives us faith to believe that fact, that truth, through the work of the Holy Ghost.

Paul and Silas give him a much more important “saving” than just extending his life on earth. They gave him the hope of an eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.

Then what happened after this first statement? ***“Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.”*** They told of the salvation Jesus Christ brings, even though things may seem to be – and maybe even are – from an earthly perspective so very terrible.

This salvation is for him and for all mankind.

Then, ***“At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family 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 family.”***

The question that led up to this is probably the most important question which a man may possibly think of in his whole life. ***“What must I do to be saved?”***

Scripture gives us an answer which you can give to any troubled person. This is an answer which offers the greatest hope anyone could ever have. And this question of troubled and terrified souls must always be met with the same answer as here: ***“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”***

Having given the jailer the great central thought and chief doctrine of the entire Christian religion, Paul and Silas now explained the way of salvation more fully, telling him and proclaiming to him the Word of the Lord, together with all those who belonged to his household, children and servants, freedmen and slaves. It was a brief, but comprehensive instruction preceding baptism. And so deeply was the man's heart moved by the events of the night and by the voice of God in these events that he took the two prisoners in that same hour of the night, and washed off their wounds.

Although the jailer washed their wounds, Paul and Silas gave to both the jailer and all the members of his household a washing to remove all the stains on their souls, by baptizing them after teaching them about Jesus Christ.

The Word of God and the Sacrament of Baptism assured this man of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, which he needed so greatly. Now the jailer took Paul and Silas into his house as honored guests. The table was set for them and a meal was served unlike anything they could expect in prison. And the jailer and all the members of his household rejoiced that faith in God had been worked in their hearts. The fact that the Lord works faith in the heart of any person, and also makes him willing to give evidence of such faith in deeds of kindness and brotherly love is a source of continual rejoicing to every Christian.

It took an earthquake to shake this man up. God does not usually use an earthquake to make people aware of their need of salvation. Sometimes it is something much less drastic or earth-shaking. It may be a virus, such as we are experiencing today. It may be something such as an illness or pain, a mild heart attack, a slight stroke, a small tumor or a minor accident. But when people who have been careless about spiritual things know that they must meet their maker and judge, they often ask the jailer's question.

You know the answer to the question ***“What must I do to be saved?”***

The answer is not “do” but “trust.” The answer for the jailer and for each individual in his household, for every human being is the same. Trust in the Lord Jesus. He saved. Not “This is how you must act or think or feel”, but ***“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”***

And fruits of faith will follow. This jailer exercised hospitality as evidence of his faith. You have opportunities too numerous to list in this short sermon. Tell the truth about sin and grace and let the Word and will of God be your guide in seeking to follow all that Jesus commands.

May we make the most of every opportunity that comes our way! Amen.