

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, February 1, 2009

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Hymns: 377: 1-7, 283, 377: 8-10, 370, 373:1
Lessons: Isaiah 49:1-6, Acts 16: 12-25, John 13: 30-14: 14.
Sermon Text: Acts 16:25-34
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Has someone ever asked you for directions to get somewhere? Were you able to give good directions? I grew up in a part of the world where roads didn't always run straight north-south or east-west. After I'd give directions to strangers out around the lake where we lived I'd think back and realize I hadn't given them the right directions. Perhaps that has happened to you. When I was teaching high school English classes I made that kind of thing a written assignment. I had students write directions from the street corner where the school was located to a familiar place of business several miles away. They were to write down what corners to turn on, which way to turn, and how far to go or what landmark would be on the next corner. Then I would read the directions out loud, anonymously, to the class. Many times you would have gotten lost trying to follow those directions.

Have you heard how to get to heaven? Can you give directions to heaven? Do you know how to be saved eternally? Could you tell someone how to get to heaven?

Many in the world don't believe in heaven. Maybe some have told you that. Many have either no idea how to get to heaven or would give the wrong directions. That is very common among those who sit in many churches that claim to be Christian. But I am hoping that you know how to be saved. Whether you would say it in 3 words, or 5 words, or 6 words or ten words you know how to be saved, how to get to heaven. Today let's review the ten words that tell anyone how to get to heaven and be saved eternally:

"BELIEVE IN THE LORD JESUS, AND YOU WILL BE SAVED"

- 1. The background of these words.**
- 2. The jailer was ready to commit suicide when he asked "what must I do to be saved?"**
- 3. God's people had the answer for him.**

In our epistle lesson you heard the background of this particular event. Paul and those with him went to a place where they found people gathered, "*a place of prayer*", and they taught about Jesus Christ. One of those who came was Lydia, a believer in the true God, who was then baptized and offered them a place to stay.

Then follows the situation which led to Paul and Silas being thrown into prison without a trial. "*Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. This girl 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 troubled 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 the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities.*" Acts 16: 16-19. It is amazing that the girl kept this up for many days before Paul commanded this evil spirit to come out of her. Then the owners of this slave girl "*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. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.” Acts 16: 20-24. Notice that the real reason for the accusation is not given to the civil courts. Paul and Silas are falsely accused. It is not unusual that the followers of Christ are accused of things which aren't true. Although this resulted in a severe beating and imprisonment, Saint Paul later wrote in his letter to the Philippian Christians that being in prison – in Rome, the capital city of the Empire yet – didn't really hinder the work of the preaching the Gospel. *"Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly."* Philippians 1:12-14.

When the demon left the girl, so did the slave owners' hope of making money. They did not rejoice that a human being had been delivered from possession by an evil spirit. They were angry that their greed could no longer be satisfied by this slave. They resented the men through whom God had delivered her. They dragged them to the marketplace, where the authorities had their headquarters.

The magistrates were the highest authorities in a colony like Philippi. Historians point out that there were two such magistrates. They judged cases involving crimes against Roman law. The accusation was that Paul and Silas were trying to convert Roman citizens to Judaism. But that wasn't the real reason they brought Paul and his companions to court. The Emperor Claudius had recently expelled all Jews from the city of Rome as troublemakers. Philippi, as a colony of Rome which tried to be like Rome in every way, would not want Jews to come and make trouble there.

The real motive behind the charge was, of course, anger and greed that they had lost their source of income when the slave girl was freed from the evil spirit.

The magistrates could see that the crowd was in an uproar, as the accusers said. They simply assumed there must be some truth to the charges. They ordered that Paul and Silas be beaten and imprisoned. The magistrates did not realize that these two Jews were also Roman citizens, protected by law from such treatment. They violated their civil rights in a very serious way.

There was no trial, only accusation and punishment. No one asked about the real reason Paul and Silas were in Philippi. No one asked about the Most High God and the way of salvation. No one was interested in justice or more importantly, salvation. Paul and Silas were flogged on the charge that they were Jews who had tried to make converts.

The jailer, as ordered, put them into the maximum-security part of the prison. In the stocks prisoners' legs were clamped and spread wide and they would suffer severe cramps after a short time. That pain would continue until they were released.

Prison on this night did not seem like the time or place to do mission work, but the believers praised God and the other prisoners heard them. Scripture says they were *“praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”* Under very painful conditions Paul and Silas sang hymns. They could do such things because they trusted the living Lord Jesus and because he gave them the strength.

Paul and Silas were locked into what should have been the most secure place in the jail. But God intervened in this imprisonment in a most miraculous way.

“Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose.” Not only the door of their cell but all the doors of the entire prison flew open.

“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?"” When prisoners escaped, the jailer or guard had to suffer whatever punishment was due those prisoners. Evidently some of the prisoners in the jail at Philippi were guilty of capital crimes, because the jailer was ready to take his own life rather than be executed by the authorities.

But none of the prisoners had left!

The man asked the most important question a human being can ask. He was convinced of his need for salvation, although it is possible he was thinking only of his continued life on earth. He may not have fully realized until that moment that he needed eternal salvation. But anyone who has been around prison surely has some idea of the wickedness of human beings including himself or herself. What he knew about his prisoners, what he had learned from their hymns and praises, the earthquake with its results – these things had apparently stirred his conscience. The answer to his question is the most important information any human being can have. There is only one correct answer and the believers in Jesus Christ would provide it. ***“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”*** It is so simple and yet so hard for the sinful human mind to accept. We must accept our need of a Savior. No matter how good we think we are we are still sinners. And at a time in history when we are urged to respect, tolerate and approve of any and all religions, we must be reminded of Jesus’ words about the only way to eternal life: ***“Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*** John 14:6. Those are hard words for someone who thinks that all religions have the same goal or that ‘god is god no matter what name you call him by’ or that everyone is going to be in heaven anyway so why should we strive to follow the truth of God’s Word? We must totally reject the words of the poet who said “It matters not, your faith or mine. All roads that lead to god are good, that center at the goal divine of love’s eternal brotherhood.” What you believe DOES matter. It is a matter of eternal life or death! And there are people dying who need to hear the message of salvation: ***“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”***

God does not usually use such dramatic means as an earthquake to make people aware of their need for salvation. It may be any event. Sometimes it is a mild heart attack, a slight stroke, a small tumor, a microscopic virus 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.

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

After these ten words of salvation, Paul and Silas told the story of Jesus and his salvation to the jailer and his family in more detail. And like Lydia, the jailer celebrated his coming to faith with hospitality toward those who had told him the way of salvation. As Lydia and her household had done, so the jailer and his family received holy baptism.

“What must I do to be saved?” That is a question with a double meaning: The jailer was concerned about his life on earth. We want others to ask us this question of their eternal life.

You may have heard about the secular program called the “Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program”. That program has its place in the world. But as you heard today, God has a much greater suicide prevention program. You know the one thing that can give anyone hope: ***“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”***

So there you have a reminder of the ten words that will tell anyone how to be saved, how to get to heaven. But what about the “3 words?” Well, your four-year old might say “Believe in Jesus”. The five words? “Believe in Jesus as Savior”. And the 6 words? “Believe in Jesus as YOUR Savior.” Don’t forget them. Tell them to everyone you know! Amen.