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Acts 16:22-34

“LIFE’S MOST URGENT QUESTION”

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It was midnight in the ancient city of Philippi. Paul and Silas, the first Christian foreign missionaries, sat with their feet chained in stocks, far back in the dank depths of a Roman jail. Their backs were bloody and festering from a whipping, which they had received at the hands of the city magistrates.

Why, they hadn’t even been given a trial, where they could defend themselves. Instead, some local businessmen—racketeers is what I would have called them—had dragged them before the city officials and said that they were a public disturbance. And, in order to scare them into leaving town, the city fathers had whipped and locked them up, much as you would throw a town drunk into the “cooler” over night.

But what had these two preachers done, which would make them candidates to spend the night in the cooler? They had delivered a demented girl from a demon, which had empowered her to tell fortunes. That’s right. This girl, who was the slave of the very racketeers who had Paul thrown in jail, was able to tell people’s fortunes. And, by doing this, she made a lot of money for her masters.

People actually thought that “the gods” possessed her body and that these gods could work through her and advise them, as they planned for their futures. What they didn’t know is that it was some demonic spirit from hell, which possessed her.

Well, Paul knew what was going on. And, with a heart of compassion, he commanded the evil spirit to come out of her, using the authority of the name of Jesus to do so.

I have missionary friends today, who have had to do the same thing. The demons have actually spoken to them, using the voice of the possessed person. God only knows, but if the old USA continues to grow darker and darker in heathenism, we may have to do such things ourselves.

But, one way or another, Paul cast the demon out of her, and the poor demented girl was set free to live a normal life. But that meant she could no longer tell fortunes. And she could no longer bring in money to her racketeering bosses. And they became furious, because their gravy train had just been derailed by this foreigner, this preacher of Jesus Christ. And so they put pressure on the city fathers to deal with Paul and his companion.

It was a set-up. There probably were a few bribes and threats passed around by the local-yokels. They probably played on the prejudices that people have toward

foreigners, and especially on Jews. And, consequently, Paul and Silas were unfairly beaten and thrown into the city jail.

And now it was midnight. Their festering backs were throbbing. Their ankles were chafed from the metal bands and heavy chains. The floor was cold and damp and moldy. Their air was musty. Doubtless their allergies were having a field day.

Their minds may have been asking the familiar question: “Why me, Lord?” But, knowing Paul, he was more likely asking: “Why not me, Lord? You never promised me a rose garden. You said that, if we followed you and did your work, we would have ‘troubles.’ Why not me, Lord?”

Tell me, how would have you reacted, my friend? Would you have cried the blues? Would you have declared that this was the last time you were ever going to do anything for Jesus? Would you have complained that you had been there for half a day and your pastor had not come to visit you; and, therefore, you were going to quit that church? (That sounds vaguely familiar.) Just what would you have done?

Well, Paul and Silas began to sing hymns and to pray. I mean, none of this silent stuff either, where you rub your fingers across your eyebrows, like some of us do in a restaurant before we eat. No sir. When you are in jail for serving Jesus, you may as well speak up. They thanked God that they were “worthy to suffer for Jesus,” who had suffered so much more for them. They thanked God that “the sufferings of this present time were not even worthy to be compared with the glory that would be theirs” in the world to come. Oh, that I could learn to rejoice in tribulations, like that!

And they sang hymns. Maybe it was something like: “Jesus paid it all; all to Him I owe...” Or maybe: “Alas and did my Savior bleed and did my Sovereign die? Would He devote that sacred head for sinners such as I?” Or maybe it was more like: “Be not dismayed, what e’er betide; God will take care of you...”

And I can just hear those refrains, wafting their sounds all over that prison: “God will take care of you.” Why, they even echoed to the room, where the jailor was trying to catch a few Z’s.

And he heard it all. “What was going on?” he thought. “I’ve heard a lot of things in my life, but nothing like this. What is it with these guys? Here they were whipped without a trial. And I never even offered to bathe their wounds. And I never gave them anything to eat. I even put them in the worst cell I had. I mean, they got a raw deal. And yet they are praising their strange God, this ‘Jesus,’ whoever He is. I don’t get it. But I know one thing: they’ve got something I don’t have, and I’d like to know where they got it!!”

I wish we had those tunes in our hymnbook. They might not have the beat, but they surely pack the punch; because, no sooner had they sung a couple, than there was an earthquake, and the prison doors fell off and the stocks, to which they were chained, broke loose.

Old Dr. Ironsides said that “this was the first recorded Christian concert, and it brought the house down!! Woo! I’d love to know what they were singing.

But those collapsing walls struck fear to the heart of the jailor. Now it was he, who was in trouble. You see: by Roman law, if a prisoner escaped, the jailor had to forfeit his own life. Well, as soon as he saw his jail house crumbling and the bars dislodging from the windows and the doors falling out of their frames, he figured that everyone was going to escape and he was a “goner.” Resolutely, he withdrew his sword

from its scabbard, placed the hilt on the floor, and bent over it, with his stomach to the point. He was going to take his own life.

Paul, deep within the prison, must have surmised what was happening. After all, he was quite learned in the field of law. He must have figured that the jailor might be preparing to do harm to himself. So he shouts out: “Don’t harm yourself. We are still here. We are not trying to run from you. We are here to share something with you.”

The startled jailor stands bolt upright. His sword clanks onto the stone floor. The jailor runs straight for the cell of these strange men, who had been serenading him with joyful songs in the night. He falls down at their feet and implores them: “What must I do to be saved? What must I do to have what you have?”

“What must I do to be saved?” I declare that this is **life’s most urgent question!**

You may not feel like you are in a life-and-death situation, like that jail keeper of long ago. But you still need to deal with this question. “For it is appointed unto all men once to die, and after this: judgment.” (Hebrews 9:26)

I don’t care who you are: young or old, healthy or infirm, rich or poor, influential or unknown. We all have a “divine appointment” with death and judgment. We are all going to pass from this life and have to give a final accounting for our lives to our Creator God. And we all need to find a way to be safe, or “saved,” when this most certainly happens to us.

“What must I do to be saved?” That is indeed **life’s most urgent question!**

Tell me, what would be your answer to that question, my friend? If someone were to ask you what you think it would take to make you right with God and to get you through the judgment and into heaven, what would you answer?

I have heard a lot of answers in my day, but nowhere have I heard the different ideas put forth as succinctly as in this film clip, where an interviewer asked people, who were just about to enter a prominent church in New York City. Watch and listen to what they said about being saved.

(Show film clip, in which people were asked what they thought they must do to get to heaven. Their answers were so typical:

“By trying to live a clean and decent life.”

“By being a good religious person, and being nice to other people, and doing my best.”

“You obey the Ten Commandments, and I think you’ve got a pretty good chance. You can’t go wrong with the Ten Commandments.”

“By following my conscience and believing in God and doing well and good.”

“By treating people properly and being fair to everyone.”

“Going through Christ and going through Mary. You have to follow Mary’s ways to go through Christ.”

“To behave myself!”

“Go to confession and treat your neighbors as good as you can.”

“I go to the sacraments every Sunday.”

“If I have done more good than bad.”

“Well, I’ve got a lot of work to do. Ha, ha, ha!”

“I’m really not that bad. I’m not a murderer or something.”
“I’m trying!”)

Tell me, do you relate to these typical answers? If I were to ask you what a person must do to be saved and go to heaven, are these the kinds of answers which you would give?

Some of us would have said these very things at earlier stages in our lives. I said many of them myself, for years, and I was in church most every Sunday.

Perhaps, if we were to interview many of you, these are the kinds of answers you would give.

Did you notice one thing that they all had in common? They all emphasized “what must **I DO**.” They all had the idea that salvation is something which **I** must work for, which I must earn by my own doing.

This is “the way that seems right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death” (Proverbs 14:12). It just seems right that, if I am going to get into heaven, I must deserve to...I must be worthy...I must earn it somehow. It is the way of works and self effort.

That Philippian jailor, though he lived in another generation and knew only about the materialistic gods of the Romans, thought the same way. He asked “What must **I do** to be saved?” He, too, as following the way that seemed right unto a man. Just like all the modern people in the filmed interview, he thought there was something that he must “do” himself to earn the favor of God.

Maybe you fell the same way.

But let me ask you: Just what can you do to be right with God?

“Do the best you can?” Oh, no. God doesn’t ask for the best we can. If you want to earn it, God says: “Be you perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

“Live a clean and decent life?” But have you? Have you always been lily white....all your life? Come on, who are you trying to kid? Yourself?

“By keeping the Ten Commandments? Have you ever looked at them closely, my friend? Oh, surely, you are not a murderer. I know that. But have you always put God first, even ahead of your own desires, as it says in number 1? Or have you always obeyed your parents, as it says in number 5? Or have you said “Oh, God,” or “Jesus Christ,” or GD, or any other things, which take God’s name in vain, like it talks about in number 3? Have you always kept the Lord’s Day sacred and always worshipped Him and taken your focus off worldly things on that day, which is His, like it says in number 4? And have you never stolen anything in your whole life (number 8)? Or have you never been sexually impure (number 7)? Have you never told a lie—I mean have you never misrepresented the truth all of your life, like it says in number 9?

Oh, I agree with the lady who said that “you can never go wrong with the Ten Commandments.” You can’t go wrong with them, no! But you can’t keep them, either, and no one in this room has kept them all. “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glorious expectation of God” (Romans 6:23), and these glorious expectations for us are given in the Ten Commandments. It’s a little late to try to “behave yourself,” isn’t it?

And please don't tell me you "keep most of them." Try that on a state trooper. Tell him that you kept most of the traffic laws. If he caught you breaking one of them, you are still guilty and you still get the ticket!

Or will you tell me that you "follow your conscience and try to do well and good." Truthfully, do you still have that childlike innocence and conscientiousness which you once had, or hasn't your conscience been damaged? The Bible tells us that the conscience can be "seared, as with a white hot iron" (I Timothy 4:2), where it isn't as sensitive as it once was.

Or maybe you have tried to "treat other people properly and to be fair to everyone." Fine! I'm glad. Maybe I can let my guard down a little, when I am around you.

But, seriously, are you fair to everyone? One man tried to tell Jesus that he had been fair to everyone. So Jesus told him the story of a good Samaritan, who went out of his way to help a man of another race, who was beaten and left dying. And it was very dangerous for him to stop and help the man, and it took him a lot of time and money to get the man back on his feet. But he did it anyway.

Listen, by the time Jesus got through describing what it meant to treat your neighbor as yourself, that man had to admit that he didn't really know that much about being fair and good to other people.

Or are you hoping that you have "more good things than bad things" on your record and that God will fairly "balance the score card?" Oh, it sounds so convincing, and how many of us have tried to fool ourselves with this logic. But tell me, is it logical? If you committed a crime, could you talk the judge into considering all the good things you have done and, therefore, to let you go free for the bad things you just did? I think not. Be serious!

God's Word tells us that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). If I have only one sin on my record, it requires the death penalty. It doesn't matter how many good things I have done. One sin alone must be punished. There is no tit-for-tat.

Oh, we all try so hard to justify ourselves, hoping we have done enough to earn a place in eternity with God. When the truth of the matter is that **we can't earn it if we had to.** "All of our attempts at righteousness are like filthy rags" in the sight of God (Isaiah 64:6). "There is none righteous, no not one; there is none that (even) understands (how to be), there is none that (really) seeks after God" (Romans 3:10-11).

There is no sense in asking: "What must **I do** to be saved?" You and I could not "do something" to save ourselves, if we had to.

But notice what Paul answered to this most urgent question in life. Paul did not tell him to clean up his act, nor to be more religious, nor to start being fairer to his neighbors. No! he told him to **depend on what Jesus had already done** to save him. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved!"

Salvation is a matter of what you are depending-on. You are either depending on what you might be able to do, or you are depending on what Jesus has already done for you.

All the people, who were interviewed, in the film clip, were depending on what they could do themselves to earn favor with God. None of them seemed to be depending on what Jesus had already done on the cross to save them. If they did depend on the

finished work of Christ, they would not have kept telling about what they were doing themselves to get in good with God.

Do you see? It is a matter of dependence.

Paul said to the jailor, and to us: Don't depend on what you can do. Depend on what Jesus has done. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved!" Don't keep trying to do something. Start trusting what Jesus has already done.

You see, there is one fact that most people have never seen or else they completely ignore: There is only one thing, which will be considered sufficient to pay for our sins. "The wages of sin is death..." (Romans 6:23).

Sin requires the death penalty. It cannot be "worked off" by any other things which we can do. God only accepts "death" as a payment for sins.

What if I wanted to buy something, and I took a stack of old National Geographic magazines down to the store? And I said: "I will give you this stack of magazines for that item, which I want. These magazines are worth a lot to me. I'll offer you them for that item on your self." The store owner would probably look at me like I was out of my mind. But I'm sure that he would say: "I'm sorry, sir, but I only take CASH!"

Well, listen, when we offer God all the good things which we have tried to do, in order to earn eternal life, He is going to say: "I'm sorry, I can't take your good works in exchange for eternal life. You have still sinned, and I told you plainly—in my Word—that the only thing which I will accept in payment for your sins is the death penalty!"

Oh, my dear friend, giving up "trying" to earn your salvation and start "trusting" in what Jesus did to buy it for you. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, did the only thing, which could have been done to save us. He took the responsibility for our sins, and He died in our place! He "died for us" (Romans 5:8).

That's right. That is why God's only begotten Son had to come to earth 2000 years ago and die on that cross. He was "paying our rap" for our sins. He was paying the death penalty for you and me. And we need to believe that He did and that God was satisfied that the debt was paid in full.

"Oh, but I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," you say. "I believe that Jesus was the Son of God and that He died on the cross for the sins of the world."

But notice more closely. Paul didn't say to believe "in" the Lord Jesus Christ. He said to believe "on" the Lord Jesus Christ.

Don't give mere intellectual assent to the fact of Jesus. No! Put your trust in Him. Put your total dependence on His finished work on the cross! Don't keep trying to add something to it. Believe on—completely trust on—the finished work of Christ, just like you are completely trusting on that chair to hold you up. Depend on what Jesus has done for you, and you will be saved.

Perhaps this will help. A friend of mine once stopped at a fruit stand. It was a hot day, and the watermelons looked so good. He asked how much they were. "One dollar," said the proprietor.

Reaching into his pocket, my friend realized that he only had ninety cents. "That's all right," said the salesman, "you can give the ninety cents to me, and I'll 'trust you' for the dime. You can bring it by tomorrow."

"Well, thank you," said my friend. "But, if you are going to trust me, why don't I give you a dime, and I will bring the ninety cents back to you tomorrow. After all, I hate to be flat broke, going home. Will you trust me for the ninety cents?"

“Oh no,” said the salesman. “I can’t do that.”

“Then,” said my friend, “you weren’t really willing to trust me at all. You were just willing to take a dime chance!”

Oh, my friend, so many that they are trusting the Lord Jesus Christ. But I wonder: are they are completely trusting Him and what He did on the cross to pay for their sins, or are they just willing to take a dime chance on Him?

If they are really willing to trust Him, then why do they keep adding to what He has done to purchase their salvation? They say that they believe; and yet, when you ask them how they expect to be saved, they keep telling you all the things which they do, in order to earn something by their own efforts. They are not “believing on” the Lord Jesus completely. They are just “taking a dime chance” on what Jesus did on the cross and padding their account with their own feeble works.

Oh, my friend, stop fooling yourself. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” alone. Trust completely in what He did for you on Calvary’s cross, and you will be saved! God says so.

If I could just get you to see this today, it would bring such peace to your heart, and you would truly begin to live “life on a higher plane.”

And it will light your fire! You will begin to work for the Lord and serve Him as you never have before. But you will do it for a different reason. You will not be trying to earn something. You will be doing it out of a heart full of gratitude for His wonderful gift.

We see this so clearly in the jailor. Why, he took Paul and Silas home. He tenderly washed their bleeding backs. He fed them supper. He spoke to them as friends. These were the fruits of gratitude for the gift of salvation, which Jesus had so graciously provided for Him.

Why, even his family could see the difference. He was a changed man. And they liked what they saw, and they wanted it, too. And, before that night was over, the jailor’s whole family believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and were saved. And, as the first baby step of obedience in the new life, they were all baptized as a family.

“What must I do to be saved?” It is life’s most urgent question.

Remember: You can do nothing to save yourself. Instead, “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved!”

Won’t you trust Him completely as your personal Savior today?