

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Baptism of our Lord – January 5th and 8th, 2012

Acts 16:25-34

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 everybody'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 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.

Dear children of God who are saved by grace through faith,

What do July 4, 1776, December 7, 1941 and September 11, 2001 all have in common? These are days that marked turning points for our nation. They are days that are forever remembered in the history of the United States. July 4, 1776 was the day our country was officially born, when we declared our independence. And we celebrate this day every year with fireworks and picnics. December 7, 1941 was the day that our country was attacked at Pearl Harbor. Up until that point, our country had remained on the sidelines in the global conflict that was overrunning Europe and Asia. But after that fateful day, we were drawn in World War II. September 11, 2001 is the day that our country was attacked once again, but this time from within our own borders. The enemy had infiltrated our defenses with a new brand of warfare, global terrorism, and we are still fighting the after effects to this day. Those dates mark major turning points in our country's history and more than likely will never be forgotten because of their great impact on the course of our nation.

Can you say the same thing for your life? Can you think of a single day or event that marked a major turning point in your life? There are probably many. The day you graduated from High School or College? Perhaps the day you started your career? Maybe the day you got married. Surely the day your children were born. We have all had major turning points in our lives, and many of these things we had planned for. You had planned to finish high school and move on to college or your career. Months and months went into your marriage day, and you had nine months to plan for your children. While they are still turning points in your lives, most of them were expected.

There is this type of situation or turning point in our text for today. This event wasn't planned or thought out in advance. It happened unexpectedly. We see a Roman soldier faced with a turning point in his life -- a turning point that would have everlasting effects. I'm sure it is day that he would never ever forget. We will use the question from this jailor in Philippi for our theme:

Theme: What Must We Do To Be Saved?

- 1. God's Gospel opens our hearts**
- 2. The Holy Spirit will lead us to believe in Jesus**

In God's Word today, we find a compelling situation. We find Paul and Silas sitting in a jail cell in the Roman colony of Philippi. They had been in Philippi for several days prior to this day. While they were there, a slave-girl who was demon possessed kept following them around. This demon had allowed this girl to tell the future to the profit of her owners. As she followed Paul and Silas she kept on saying, **"These men are servants**

of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” And while that was the truth, it wasn't coming from the best source. Paul didn't want the demons to discredit the truth, so he drove the demons from the girl. When the owners found out about this, they were angry at the loss of their income, so they dragged Paul and Silas before the city leaders and made up charges against them. Without a trial that was due them as Roman citizens, Paul and Silas were thrown into the most secure part of the prison in Philippi.

Paul and Silas seemed to be having a bad day, wouldn't you agree? They had been given an unfair trial, a flogging and now false imprisonment without so much as a shred of evidence against them. I don't know about you, but when I've have a bad day, my first tendency is to mope around and be crabby. And my days have never have been as bad as this one. And yet that's not at all what we see with Paul and Silas, **“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”** You can imagine the impact that witness must have had on the other prisoners. No doubt the other men in that prison were there for a real reason. The context of what happens leads us to believe that this was a prison where the worst of criminals were held. They had to have known what had happened to Paul and Silas, how they were imprisoned without any kind of reason. But they were not bitter. In fact, they were praising God! What kind of men were these men?

But it wasn't only the other prisoners who undoubtedly saw and heard Paul and Silas' witness that night. There was one other man there, the jailor. You can imagine what kind of man he must have been to be responsible for a jail full of hard-core criminals. No doubt he was used to hearing things from the prisoners: curses, threats, angry words and maybe even some crying. But never had he heard such a thing as what Paul and Silas were saying. Although I'm sure he didn't realize it when he took these two men into custody, this Philippian jailor was about to experience a major turning point in his life.

“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. 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?” There were two earthquakes in the prison that night. The first shook the foundations of the prison so violently that all the doors flew open and everyone's chains flew off. It shook the jailor out of his sleep and when he saw the scene with all the doors open, he was ready to kill himself. But Paul saw him and encouraged him that all the prisoners were still there. This brought the jailer rushing into Paul and Silas' cell on his knees and trembling.

All of this brings up some questions, but perhaps there are three that are the most pressing. First, why did none of the prisoners try to escape? While we can only speculate, it's not out of the realm of possibility that they too were impacted by the example of Paul and Silas. Perhaps, they too were moved by the witness that Paul and Silas had shared in their hardship. The second question is why was the jailer ready to kill himself? As a Roman colony, Philippi fell under the Roman rules. It was the Roman law that if any prisoners escaped, the jailer would be required to suffer the punishment of the escapees. The jailer knew that he would be dying anyways, and so killing himself seemed to be the easy way out.

Those questions have pretty logical answers. But the third is perhaps the most challenging to understand. Why would this hard-core jailer, who was clearly in charge of some of the worst criminals, why would he fall trembling at the feet of Paul and Silas? The answer is found in his words, **“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”** What would cause this jailer to ask this question? What would bring this rough and tough man to his knees trembling? It wasn't the earthquake that shook the foundations of the prison, although I'm sure that shook him up when he realized what could have happened. What brought the jailer to his knees was the earthquake of God's Law working in his conscience. He had put these two servants of God in prison. He heard them singing praises to God. Maybe he even fell asleep to this singing. And then he was abruptly awakened and stared death face to face. And that encounter with death made him realize that he was afraid to meet his maker. His conscience told him that he deserved a far worse fate than those he was guarding. He was desperate to know how he could avoid that and be saved. God's Law had rocked his soul.

All of us here today have had turning points in our lives. But none of them are as major as the day that our souls were confronted with God's Law. If we were to stand before a judge in this world and lay our deepest and darkest secrets – if we were to display every sin we have ever committed, that judge could probably rate us in some of order by bad we are. In his opinion, there would be worse sinners than others. But before the Judge of heaven and earth, there are no worse sinners or better sinners. There are only sinners. And every sinner deserves a fate worse than physical death – eternal death in hell. And we all face that turning point. And the natural question to ask is that of the jailer, **“What must I do to be saved?”** Listen to Paul's answer; it might just be the greatest turning point in your life. **“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 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 is really a foolish one. Do we really think that we can do anything to be saved from the God who shook the prison that day? Paul's answer is not: This is what YOU must do . . . His answer is: It has all been done, there is nothing for you to do; receive the benefit in faith and in baptism! For believing is not doing anything, it is a receiving of something from God. The only way to escape the punishment of our just God is through the work and life of the Lord Jesus Christ. Others might put conditions on God's free gift of salvation or point sinners to what they must or should do to be saved. But the way to eternal life is not found in what sinners do, for there is nothing sinners can do to win salvation. Christ has done it all! And he gives you that great gift of baptism. Through simple water and the Word, the Holy Spirit gives you the forgiveness that Christ has won for you – the forgiveness he earned as he gave his life on the cross for the sins of the whole world. The day you were baptized marked the biggest turning point in your life. It changed you from a sinner to a saint, from lost to found, from dead to alive!

What Must I Do to be Saved? Absolutely Nothing! There is nothing you can do. All that can be done is received God's gift of salvation as he offers it to you free of charge. Believe that God did all of this for us horrible, terrible, undeserving sinners. Because he did! He died on the cross to take away all of our sins and to give us a home in heaven. Believe that it is true, and you will be saved. And your life will never be the same. Amen.