

The Question!
Acts 16:16-34
September 21, 2008
Rev. Curtis J. Young

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Apart from the Gospels, our passage contains the most pointed question in the New Testament: “What must I do to be saved?”

The answer is important, obviously, but I want us to focus on the question, because it’s important, too.

Isn’t it true that the answers to questions don’t matter to people until they ask, until they feel the need to ask?

For this reason, some maintain the answer to the jailer’s question is no longer relevant because the question is no longer asked. In some Christian circles people cringe from “talking that way”.

I believe this question has never been more relevant than it is today, and that it makes perfectly good sense to ask it.

Let’s begin with the Philippian jailer and what lay behind his question. The earthquake was merely the latest in a series of strange events that had taken place since Paul, Silas, and Timothy had come preaching Christ at Philippi.

First, there was the demonized slave girl with occult power. She made a scene wherever they went. (16-18) As they were preaching, she was screaming, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.”

General heckling is bad enough. Talk about demonic heckling! How distracting and confusing! Passersby must have wondered if this just some sort of circus, an occasion for weird mockery. But then Paul commanded the demon to leave her in the name of Jesus Christ. And it had, and she had become as docile as a lamb. Now she followed them not to harass but to hear and believe.

Then there was that terrible mockery of justice. (19-24) The slave girl’s freedom had come at a stiff price for her masters. Before she could tell the future; now she no longer did.

Enraged they trumped up charges against Paul and Silas that were thinly veiled race bating. “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar...” They are “advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.”

Here is irony for you: Casting out a demon was a socially unacceptable practice, but demon possession was, what, a social good?

Philippi was a Roman colony settled by retired Roman soldiers, very patriotic. An uncivil, un-Roman party has come to our town to disturb Roman law and order? Why have a trial when there could be no possible defense!

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“Beat them with rods,” the magistrates ordered. “Again and again and again,” Luke’s words convey. “Then throw them into the darkest part of the prison. Then bind their feet. That’ll teach ‘em. Tomorrow they’ll run with their tails between their legs. They’ll bother us no more.”

Anyone who cared about Roman law, and the jailer did, had to be shaken before the earthquake hit. Charges had been made up. A mob had been stirred up. A verdict without a trial was illegal. The punishment was indefensible. Yet the jailer was part of it.

Next there was the prisoner’s response. (25) In a prison, you would expect to hear cursing, pleadings, cries of rage or sorrow. Paul and Silas were heard praying and singing to God.

Then came the earthquake. What a strange affair, that even as the doors sprang open, the chains binding the prisoners came loose from the walls!

And this was even stranger. No one left. And Paul, one of those badly mistreated prisoners cried out saved the jailer’s life: “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

That was when the jailer realized these men had not been at his mercy. He was at their mercy. Again and again, in the name of this Jesus they had shown mercy and how he had been show mercy.

So he came before them. “Sirs,” you text says, literally, “Lords.” You have been preaching and teaching many others “the way to be saved.” Now I ask you, “What must I do to be saved?”

The jailer knew he must come to terms with this God. Like the quake that shook open the prison doors, and jarred loose the chains on the prisoners, this man’s worldview had been turned on its head.

Rome, for which this was sworn to live or die, was not so absolute in power. Neither was it perfect in justice. Neither did it possess mercy, the mercy he had just tasted for the first time. When he was helpless, he received help.

For the first time he realized that without God, he was without hope. His confidence in Rome was misplaced -- in traditions of his culture, in the justice of its laws, in the judges it produced, in the pride of his race. At midnight in prison, Rome could not save him

The jailer felt his need to be saved, and he realized he could not save himself. So he asked: “What must I do to be saved?”

So Paul said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, the one by whose name we speak and act, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

“What must I do to be saved?” Obviously today many think this question is irrelevant and so, too, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But it keeps being asked. I would argue that it keeps being asked -- because people still feel the need to ask it. Even if circumstances have changed, the experience of the jailer is being repeated again and again.

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We sit here this morning, in so many ways the product of our own culture and its dogma. I think particularly of what is called “The Period of the Enlightenment” in Europe and America. It was birthed in the late 17th century and buried in the rubble of two World Wars.

Nevertheless, the assumptions of the Enlightenment continue to shape laws, the courts, public education, the press, and the arts.

As the name suggests, the Enlightenment was a philosophical movement that could not have begun with greater optimism in our ability to come to certainty and knowledge through reason alone, apart from revelation or faith in God.

“I think, therefore I am,” wrote Rene Descartes. My confidence is in my reason. It’s how I know I exist, and it is how I can come to know what else exists besides me. Reason leads to knowledge and knowledge leads to progress. Progress is the future of humanity.

Other philosophers followed. Some stressed the use of reason, others the use of the senses over reason, but even the debate was hailed as a new stream of living water that would lead to a new world order.

Instead it produced ideologies including Marxism and Nazism and the worst inhumanities ever committed, before ending in a stagnant pool of despair. In that stagnant pool we find ourselves today, bound by the assumption that this is a material universe in which we can know nothing for certain and there is no truth.

What are we to say? If you rely only on your physical senses for input, you can only perceive material things. If you rely only on reason to come to knowledge, you can only know what you think.

In such a bleak place, there is one question to ask: How can I give my life some sense of purpose and meaning in these moments before I die? From some the answer is: “You can’t.” From others the answer is: “Make something up. Do whatever you feel.”

Think about it. This certainly involves a great deal of freedom, but it is not the freedom that comes with enlightenment, with having knowledge and knowing truth. It is the freedom that comes with despair. It is in the end a recipe for anarchy.

Either way – deny that meaning is possible or counsel others to make something up -- the prevailing view in our culture when it comes to God is: “Leave me alone. We all know we cannot know anything for certain.”

That raises a question. If we cannot know anything for certain, then how can we know we can’t know anything for certain?

The true lesson of the Enlightenment is not: We cannot know anything for certain. The true lesson is, if you begin by assuming that the only knowledge you have is the knowledge that comes to you through reason, that’s no different from saying, “All I can know is what I can figure out for myself. I need no help and will accept no help.

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Ask any teacher. That is not a formula for progress. It is a formula for failure. In the end, you will lose any confidence in yourself let alone find the truth of God.

As much empathy as I have for people asking, “How can I find my meaning for my life?” I am sure this is the wrong question. We have built a philosophical foundation only to discover how unreliable it is, how misleading it is, and we ourselves have shaken it apart. It is from the rubble, looking through our cultural debris, that we ask the question, trying to find something we can value, in order to give us value.

The right question in this condition is a much higher and greater question. The right question to ask is: “What must I do to be saved.” People need the courage and humility to raise it.

- ◆ How can I escape from this dungeon where my spirit is chained?
- ◆ How can I be saved from this slide into meaningless, purposeless, amoral, agnosticism?
- ◆ How can my eyes be opened so I can see what is true?
- ◆ How can my ears be unplugged so I can hear songs of hope?
- ◆ How can I be free to live again?

Paul’s answer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved – you and your household.”

Jesus has come to rescue us, to deliver us, to redeem us. He has come full of mercy and truth to save us from the consequences of the mess we are in, and this state of alienation from God.

This is not just cultural but deeply personal and individual. Jesus died on the cross for our wayward sinfulness, and rose, to reconcile us to God and share himself with us as our Savior. So we can know the way, and the truth, and the life.

Rather than living our lives on the shattered remains of a foundation that has proven so hopeless, so truthless, and that so diminishes our humanity, we live by faith in him who died and rose again, in the certainties of God’s mercy and truth, now and forever.

Salvation does not come from our culture or its teachers. It comes from heaven and the Savior God has sent. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved!”