

THE SALVATION OF A DESPERATE SOUL

Acts 16.25-34

CBC-17 Jan 2010

“What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16.30).

Have you ever been desperate enough to ask that question? Do you know the answer? Have you embraced it? The most desperate people sometimes come to experience the greatest blessing, as many of us know firsthand. This biblical story illustrates it. Desperate or not, you need its gospel message.

Five narrative elements in this account (read elements, then story).

BACKGROUND. Paul’s “second missionary journey” from Antioch to Asia Minor and Europe, revisiting towns before attending the Jerusalem Council (15.36). The Macedonian vision (16.6-10) led them to Philippi, “the chief city of that part of Macedonia, and a [Roman] colony” (16.12). They led Lydia seller of purple to Christ (16.13-15), drove out a demon from a damsel exploited by her masters for financial gain (16.16-19). This led to Paul and Silas’s severe beating and placement in the pitch black darkness of the inner prison, as if they were dangerous criminals (16.20-24).

3 main characters: Paul, Silas (suffering innocents), jailer (pagan).

1. THE CHRISTIAN TESTIMONY (16.25)

“At midnight.” “Since business was concluded generally by noon, Paul and Silas had been beaten in the morning and held in the inner prison in stocks, unable to move their legs, for about 12 hours” (LEKGNT).

They were not complaining, but “praying, . . . singing praises” (lit.). Praises! Our God “giveth songs in the night” (Job 35.10). Not only was praise their constant custom (Psa 34.1), but they had joy in their honor to suffer shame for Jesus (Acts 5.41), in persecution for him (Matt 5.10-12), and in their spiritual success in Philippi (Lydia, slave girl; cf. Acts 15.3; Luke 15.7). Even in the worst of times the true Christian has cause to rejoice and sing.

“The prisoners were listening to them” (ESV). The original implies “the closest attention” and “that the missionaries held their attention throughout” (LEKGNT). This was no performance for others, but others heard anyway. When you least suspect it, unbelievers may be paying attention to you and noticing your testimony expressed in various ways, and this can become a powerful means of evangelism—especially when it is the spontaneous overflow of your joyful heart in trial! Lord deliver us from artificial evangelism!

Little did they realize it, but they were about to be delivered by a surprising and wonderful providence. They obviously didn’t need the test

any longer so God delivered them from it (cf. 2 Chron 20.22—when Judah began to sing and to praise the Lord by faith, he gave them victory over their enemies).

2. THE SITUATIONAL CRISIS (16.26)

God sent this earthquake of perfect location, timing, intensity to open immediately and all at once the prison doors and loose the prisoners’ chains. If not a miracle per se, this was clearly a very special Providence. And what was proved to be a wonderful opportunity for everyone was perceived by the jailer to be a catastrophe. The jailer was set free spiritually through this quake!

The earthquakes at Jesus’ crucifixion (Matt 27.50-54) and resurrection (Matt 28.2) were clearly divine signs, and so here, of divine deliverance, and the jailer took it as a confirmation of Paul and Silas’ spiritual legitimacy.

God sends all earthquakes. He is just and wise in each one, even Haiti.

3. THE HOPELESS UNBELIEVER (16.27)

The jailer woke up, saw the prison doors open, assumed the prisoners had fled, and was about to put himself to death with his own sword, preferring this to his anticipated shame and punishment (cf. Acts 12.19).

Suicide is unnatural, wrong, often signals hopelessness and despair. Even though it may seem right or necessary, it never is. There is good news for the most desperate sinner; the answer is found in Christ!

4. THE GODLY COUNSEL (16.28-32)

First, Paul acted toward suicide intervention. From within the darkness, he cried out with a loud voice (to be heard, convey urgency and earnestness, “Do to yourself no evil” (lit.), perhaps suggesting both “bodily violence and moral wrong . . . As if he had said, ‘Neither hurt thy body nor sin against thy soul’” (J. A. Alexander) followed by the simplest and plainest of reasons: “for we are all here,” requiring no religious faith but just common sense. And it worked! My friend, nothing is so bad you need to kill yourself. Put it off and reconsider your other options.

Second, the jailer asked the right spiritual question with the right attitude from the right people. “He rushed in, and trembling, fell down before Paul and Silas” (lit.). Note his urgency, fear, reverence, recognition. Evidences of the Spirit’s work of power and grace in him. Of the Great Awakening, one wrote:

The strong, sometimes even agonizingly overwhelming, conviction of sin so widespread at this date was nothing more than is common to all true revivals. Men suddenly, and in large numbers, are made to feel the real nature and danger of sin. . . . ‘All great religious

awakenings begin in the dawning of the august and terrible aspects of the Deity upon the popular mind, and they reach their height and happy consummation in that love and faith for which the antecedent fear has been the preparation'. Yet such emotion, far from being the mere general movement of a crowd, is strikingly personal and individual. . . . 'One of the prominent features of the great awakening was that the gospel was armed by the Holy Spirit with a tremendous and irresistible *individualizing* power. Man was made to come forth into the light and take his appropriate place before God as guilty and accountable (Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography by Iain Murray).

Practically in the form of catechetical instruction (lit. rendering follows):

Q. What is necessary for me to do that I may be saved?

A. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved, you and your house.

- * Question surely asks about **spiritual salvation**, perhaps because of he heard about the slave girl (16.17), or from their singing and praying. He had decided not to commit suicide since he felt safe from physical danger.
- * Question implies **need** for salvation—all need it (Rom 1.18; 3.10, 23).
- * Question implies **need to do something** to be saved, and instead of correcting him, the preachers command him in the imperative voice.
- * Question implies the **necessity of this response** to be saved. Without it, you should tell yourself the truth that you are lost and damned, no matter your previous moral/religious experience or standing in the church.
- * **Answer is NOT** to make a decision or come forward in a religious service or be baptized or turn over a new leaf or become a good person,
- * **but to “believe on (or in) the Lord Jesus,”** that is, look away from who you are (a sinner) and your sins and “righteousnesses” (filthy rags; Isa 64.6), and look to Christ in his person (Lord and Savior) and work (crucifixion, resurrection) for your salvation (Isa 45.22; cf. Mark 16.15-16; John 1.12; 3.16, 36; 6.47; 20.30-31; Acts 13.38-39; Rom 5.1-2; 10.9-10).

Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Faith is chosen by God to be the receiver of salvation, because it does not pretend to create salvation, nor to help in it, but it is content humbly to receive it [and thus God gets all the glory]. Faith is the tongue that begs pardon, the hand which receives it, and the eye which sees it; but it is not the price which buys it. Faith never makes

herself her own plea, she rests all her argument upon the blood of Christ (Spurgeon, All of Grace).

- * Answer promises not “proxy salvation,” but salvation **to all who believe** → the jailer, his family, and all believers without exception (cf. Acts 2.39). That is why they spoke “the word of the Lord” to him and to all that were in his house (16.32), and “all his house” became believers (16.34).

Therefore believe! Your sins and enslaving habits and guilt and spiritual misery should make you desperate, and God’s promise and gift of Christ and summons should make you hopeful. These are all powerful incentives to turn from pride to humility, from self-sufficiency to reliance upon grace, from chasing the pleasures of sin for a season to embracing the treasure of Christ.

5. THE BELIEVING RESPONSE (16.33-34)

The great salvation God has accomplished in Jesus Christ calls for a believing response from all who hear the good news.

FAITH, prompting all his other good actions. “Having believed in God” (lit., 16.34).

LOVE, especially to Christians who had been the means of his salvation. Practically demonstrated in washing wounds and feeding mouths. He who washed was washed spiritually; he who served food was fed spiritually.

BAPTISM. Luke stresses its promptness after believing → “straightway” or “at once” (ESV). Baptism should not precede the candidate’s exercise of faith (e.g., not infant baptism), nor be unduly delayed after the exercise of faith. Not how Luke stresses all his household members believed before baptism, and also how promptly baptism occurred after their credible profession of faith.

REJOICING. “Exulted” (lit.), boasting in God’s grace alone (Gal 6.14). “Rejoice because your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10.20).

APPEAL. This godly counsel to the jailer comes through Scripture as God’s counsel and command to you: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,” and this is his promise if you do, “And thou shalt be saved,” all your sins forgiven, a new heart and a new life and a new future forever.

Why would you put this off? How can you dismiss this call of God upon you? I urge you to believe in Christ right now where you are, and then you can know that the promised blessing is yours. Then show your love for those who have helped you to God, publicly confess your faith in baptism, and celebrate our salvation in Christ by church fellowship. God help every one of you to respond to the gospel as you should. Amen.