

God's Great Plan of SALVATION

The Philippian Jailer

Acts 16:31

“What must I do to be saved?” It was a prison officer who first asked this great question some two thousand years ago. Terrified by an earthquake and the apparent escape of all his prisoners, the jailer in Philippi was on the point of suicide. Then he heard the assuring voice of the apostle Paul, his most heavily guarded prisoner: “Do thyself no harm: for we are all here” (Acts 16:28). Shaken to the core, the jailer “called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:29–30). The answer he received went to the heart of his soul’s need and set before him God’s simple way of salvation: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.”

The experience of the earthquake opened the jailer’s eyes to see his personal need of salvation. Very often God uses such circumstances to speak to our hearts and to awaken us to the realization that we need to be saved. It has been often said, “Man’s extremity is God’s opportunity.” But it is also true that man’s extremity is *man’s* opportunity.

Perhaps your life has been shaken by such earthquake experiences as bereavement, sickness, and tragedy. Through these the Lord has been knocking at your heart’s door to bring you to the awareness of your need to be saved. The Philippian jailer had to be brought to the point where the foundations of his life, like those of the prison he guarded, were shaken by God. That is what it took to bring him to the place where he became anxious and urgently cried, “What must I do to be saved?”

Paul and Silas had only one message for the jailer: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.” They instructed him to believe *on* the Saviour, not just *about* Him. They did not tell him to be baptized or to partake of the sacraments. They did not speak to him about church membership or good works. They would deal with these things in their proper place and at the proper time. This man was seeking salvation and the answer Paul and Silas gave was clear and direct: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.”

A minister was trying to lead an elderly Scottish woman to Christ. Try as he might, he could not make her see the meaning of believing. Immediately on leaving her house he had to cross a rickety bridge. When he tentatively touched it with his foot the woman called out, “Can ye nae lippen to the

bridge?”—which, translated into plain English, means, “Can’t you put your full weight on the bridge?” The minister had just the expression he needed to show the woman the meaning of believing. He at once said to her, “Can ye nae lippen to Jesus? Can’t you cast your full weight upon Him? Can’t you trust Him? Can’t you commit yourself to Him?” The woman grasped the simple meaning of believing. She trusted the Lord Jesus, and her life was changed.

In the person of His dear Son, God has done all that needs to be done to save sinners. At Calvary Christ completed the work of purchasing redemption. He stood as the sinner’s substitute and bore the wrath of God against our sin. He has made a full atonement and has risen from the dead, almighty to save all who come to God by Him (Hebrews 7:25). His salvation is free to all who “repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15). “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.”

The jailer believed and in that moment he became a new man in Christ. His life was transformed. His first act was to wash and tend the wounds of the prisoners, whom he had cruelly mistreated and who had repaid him by telling him God’s great plan of salvation. That is what the gospel does. It makes crooked people straight, drunken people sober, and dishonest people honest.

When D. L. Moody, the famous American evangelist, was holding meetings in St. Louis in 1880, the *Globe-Democrat* announced that it would publish daily reports of his sermons. One night Moody preached on the conversion of the Philippian jailer, and the next morning the paper came out with the sensational headline, “How the Jailer Was Caught!” A copy of the paper fell into the hands of Valentine Burke, a notorious prisoner awaiting trial in the city jail. Burke thought he had once passed through a town called Philippi in Illinois and so was anxious to read of the fate of its jailer. When he realized that the *Globe-Democrat* was reporting what had happened in ancient Macedonia, he was disgusted. But he could not shake off the text, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” God used it to convict him, and there in his cell, at midnight, he prayed for the first time in his life. The following Sunday he spoke with Christians who held services in the jail and was led into the light of the gospel. Burke was a changed man, and when he came to trial, the case against him was not pressed and he was released on a legal technicality.

Later he became a sheriff’s deputy, and when the sheriff turned over to him his official photograph from the rogues’ gallery, Burke compared it with a recent one: “Notice the difference in the enclosed pictures. See what our holy religion can do for the chief of sinners” On the back of the old photograph he inscribed Psalm 113:7-8: “He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill; that he may set him with the princes, even with the princes of his people.”

“What must I do to be saved?” If you are asking that question, the answer is the same for you as it was for the Philippian jailer and for Valentine Burke—“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” ■



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