

Mt. Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

1st Week After Epiphany

January 8th, 2012

Acts 16:15-34

What Must I DO to be Saved?

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“What should I do?” It was my Vicar year - my 1st time cooking for myself. I made something in the oven that bubbled over onto the element, & it started a grease fire. As smoke poured out at me, I ran to the oven as quick as I could; but when I got there, in my panic, I had no idea what to do to fix the problem! Praise God my roommate was there! He told me to grab the fire extinguisher next to the stove & to shoot it at the flames to put it out; I did - & of

course, that fixed it. “What should I do?” We’ve all asked that question before when we knew *something* needed to be done but we weren’t quite sure what. / In today’s sermon text, we see someone ask the all-important question **“What should I do so I can be right with God?”** Since scores of people today are still asking that same question, let’s look at that question for a few minutes today & learn God’s answer to it.

As our text begins, we see Paul & Silas are sitting in prison in the city of Philippi for nothing more than preaching the gospel of Jesus as the world’s Savior from sin as they were called to. But notice that while their bodies were in chains in that prison, their spirits were not; we’re told, “About midnight, Paul/Silas were praying & singing hymns to God, & the other prisoners were listening to them.” How about that! Instead of blaming God & whining about how unfair He’s treating them here in prison, they’re praising God, & doing it in front of the other prisoners so that they’d be able to learn about God through Paul/Silas’ faith confession in song! Paul & Silas’ joyful attitude must have caused both their fellow prisoners & their guards to wonder, “How can these guys be so happy & content in such a bad time & place in their life?!” Would *you* have done that in their shoes?

Then something else happened that rocked their world - literally! We’re told, “There was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken” - so much so, in fact, that, “all the prison doors flew open & everybody’s chains came loose.” Well, we’re told, “The jailer *woke up*; & as he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword & was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped.” *Why?* Because under Roman law, if a guard allowed a prisoner to escape, he’d have to serve the rest of that prisoners sentence; there’s incentive to get the guards to do their job well, right? There must’ve been criminals in this prison guilty of capital crimes; & if *they* had escaped, as the jailer assumed they had since the doors were all wide open now, *he* would have been executed for their crimes, since he had allowed their escape! So he must have thought he might as well take his life himself (a warped sense of honor); & he was ready to do just that!

Until God intervened. We’re told, “But Paul shouted, ‘Don’t harm yourself - we’re all here!’” And they were - every criminal was right there, where they were supposed to be! So how did that jailer respond to this unthinkable & unimaginable turn of events? We’re told he “rushed in & fell trembling before Paul/Silas. He then brought Paul & Silas out & asked ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’” There it is: ‘What should I do?’

Why did he ask *that* question? Well, it seems that this earthquake & its results, which had led him to the brink of despair & to the very threshold of his life ending, had caused ‘his life to pass before his eyes’ as tragedies often do; & he didn’t like what he saw! More importantly he knew deep down inside that there was *somebody else* who wasn’t going to like what He saw in him either - namely that somebody Who’s in charge of every earthquake & nature itself – Almighty God; & that was scary for that jailer to think about! As a Roman soldier, his life was probably not a poster-child of morality. Right here we see that when it came to being a good soldier, he’d fallen down flat on his face; he was sleeping at his post. He knew that was wrong, just as he knew how wrong some of the other things in his life were; his conscience would have told him that. Now this earthquake experience had reminded him again of just how fragile life is, & that when it’s over, he was going to have to answer for all the times he’d cheated his employer by sleeping on the job, as well as all of the times he’d perhaps looked the other way as a fellow soldiers took a bribe or maybe he’d even taken one, for all the times he’d taken out his days’ aggravations on those entrusted to his care, as well as all the other times he’d broken God’s law his whole life! And he knew the only thing that awaited him for all those sins & those like them as he died was God’s anger & punishment for not being the kind of person God expects; that goes for us too! So *that* led him to that all-important question: ‘What must **I do so I can be or get right with my God?’**

God still leads people to that all-important question today too. Maybe not through powerful earthquakes here in WI; but He has His ways - a death in the family, a heart attack, stroke, or cancer diagnosis, a loss of a job, a car accident or just a close call. How often don’t you hear people say that such things served as a wake-up call for them? Those things remind us *we are mortal* too; we’re not going to live forever! People our age & younger are dying every day; & when we die, we’re all going to have to answer for every time we’ve failed - as a parent by

disciplining our kids in anger instead of love - as a spouse who was only interested in what my spouse could do for me instead of me putting them ahead of myself as God intends - as employee who stole from the boss every time we milked the clock or failed to give the faithfulness our work deserved - as a citizen who looked to get around laws that our God-established government gave, or who only obeys those laws when it's convenient or because someone's looking (like as the squad car is sitting there running radar, I'll slow down & go 55 - but only then). Yes, one day we're going to have to answer for all the times we've failed; & when we do, we know we fully deserve "the wage of our sins," which God says "is *death*" - that's both physical death as well as eternal suffering in Hell's torments after death! Yes, as God allows tragedies to touch our lives as a reminder that our days are numbered, we too all naturally join the jailer in crying out in fear: "What must or should I do so that the terrible consequences of my selfish acts of rebellion don't destroy me eternally?"

The awesome news is that there *is* hope! We too can have real pleasure, peace, & purpose here in this life - the kind the jailer saw in Paul & Silas here in fact! They didn't seem to be panicked by their chains or the uncertainty of their future freedom, or by that bad earthquake that they'd just gone through which easily could have taken their life! The jailer wanted that calmness & confidence he saw in Paul & Silas; deep down, we all do - don't we? Well, we *can* have it, & more! We can even have perfection & Paradise, a perfect life with no more troubles or sorrows of any kind that will last forever & ever! God says it's out there & available to all! So we join the jailer in saying, "Sounds GREAT! So what should/must I do so I can have such treasures?"

God's answer to that question through Paul & Silas was: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus & you'll be saved.' *Faith* in Jesus & the work He came to do saves people from sin & is the key to these awesome eternal blessings!

So the next natural question then is: where do I get this faith? Can I buy it from somebody whom God has made the keeper of it? Can I earn it by doing some good deeds to impress God? Can I come to this faith myself somehow? NO - God says it doesn't work that way! He says we can't earn, buy, or come to faith; for "It's a gift of God, *not by works*, so no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). But the great news is it's a gift God *does* give!

So *how* does He give it? Well let's see how the jailer got it. "Then (Paul & Silas) spoke the Word of the Lord to him & all the others in His house ... Then immediately he & all his family were baptized ... (The jailer) was filled with joy because *he'd come to believe* in God - he & his whole family." Here we see the 2 tools that God uses to put saving faith in Jesus in a human heart. The Word of God is the 1st tool that brings God's gift of faith. The message of God's law comes to show us we haven't & can't be perfect as God expects, & therefore we deserve God's wrath & punishment; & then once we see our need, the gospel shows us how Jesus, true God, willingly became man & was born into this world to do for us sinners what we couldn't do for ourselves - namely, to be perfect & keep all of God's laws, & then to pay for us the price our sins deserve on the cross, so we don't have to endure hell for them! Yes, the Holy Spirit, who's always working in God's Word, the Bible, uses that Word of God's law & gospel to give & strengthen saving *faith* in us that makes Jesus' work our own.

The other tool that the Spirit uses to give & strengthen faith is mentioned in this account too: baptism. God calls baptism "a washing of rebirth & renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). He says that by it, we're all made 'sons of God' (& remember *sons* in this culture were the heirs!); for by the faith that baptism also creates & strengthens, we're clothed with Jesus' very blood righteousness, & are given new life as a member of God's own family who will be going to heaven to enjoy eternal life with Him forever one day! (Galatians 3:26-27)

Yes, what a special blessing our baptism is; it really should comfort us all the days of our life. Martin Luther wrote that at times, he didn't know where to turn in the midst of his troubles as Satan was attacking. So he actually carved into his desk-top the words "Baptizitus Sum" which means in Latin "I'm baptized!" He did that so he'd always *remember* that in his baptism, God made him a promise - a promise that *he* now belonged to God - that his sins were all forgiven in Jesus *his* Savior - that God would always be there to give *him* the strength & power needed to stand up under temptation & to withstand it! Reminded of that, Luther could boldly say to Satan: "Get out of here - for I'm the Lord's! By baptism, He said so! He's in control of me - you're not!" Friends, we can do the same; & as we grow & use the other tool of God's Word more, that seed of faith planted in us in our baptism germinates, takes root, & grows, producing more God-pleasing actions, & a life full of even more God-given joy - a life led to thank & praise God for this free *gift* of His awesome saving love in Christ.

So then, back to our question for today: "What should I do?" If you hear or ask that question in regard to a fire, well then as I was reminded, use a fire extinguisher & put it out! But as you hear someone ask or are led to ask yourself "What should I do to be a child of God & to be sure I will go to heaven when I die" - maybe because of some tragedy or sorrow that has come along in life, stop & thank God; because there's nothing *we* should or can

DO for that! It all comes *freely* from our loving God as a gracious gift - a gift Jesus won for us & that the Spirit gives to us free of charge by God's tools of the Word & the Sacrament of baptism. Wow! Amen.