

May 16, 2010/7C Easter
"What Must I Do to be Saved?"
Acts 16:16-34
John 17:20-26
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Acts 16:16-34

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

John 17:20-26

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may

be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Swedenborg

The Lord had two purposes in coming into the world, redemption and the glorification of His Human; and by these He saved both men and angels. These two purposes are quite distinct, but still they are combined in effecting salvation. The nature of redemption was shown in the preceding paragraphs to be a battle against the hells, their subjugation and afterwards the ordering of the heavens. Glorification, however, is the uniting of the Lord's Human with His Father's Divine. This took place by stages and was completed by His passion on the cross. For every person ought ... to approach God, and the more nearly one does so, the more closely does God on His side enter.... The reason why the actual union was fully achieved by the passion on the cross is that it was the last temptation which the Lord underwent in the world; and temptations create a link. In temptation it looks as if a person is left to himself, but one is not, since God is then most closely ... and secretly gives one support. When therefore anyone is victorious over temptation, one is most inwardly linked with God....

True Christian Religion #126

Not all of us here have wrestled outright with the question asked by the Philippian jailor, the one so often bandied about within the evangelical community of today, "What must I do to be saved?"; but I'll bet that each of us has wondered, at one time or another, how we were going to make it safely through a hard time in life, let alone make it through at all. It may have been while facing an economic crisis, or a relational quagmire, or the pressure of too much work in too little time, or an addiction of some kind, but each of us have wondered, struggled, and prayed in our own way. It is a universal human experience, at times of great conflict and crisis, to look within, or toward a higher power, and there seek strength, wisdom, courage, and perhaps a very large portion of luck. It is difficult to act according to our core values at such times, since the power of anxiety is such an overwhelming influence, and we are tempted to do what is expedient rather than what is right and good and true. The truth is, as the Psalmist wrote, that the Lord beckons to us, woos us, sings to us, knocks on the door of the soul, and shines eternal light upon us, especially when our hope and energy are at low ebb.

The jailer we read about in the Book of Acts was a government functionary just trying to obey orders. One day he received two more prisoners from the local constabulary, and locked them up securely according to instructions. Unlike the other inmates, these two were different. In spite of the red welts and bruises on their bodies from the state-sponsored beating they had received hours earlier, they sang hymns and prayed aloud during the long dark evening. Their captive audience consisted of the other prisoners in the jail, and the guards.

Somehow, in the darkest time of the body and spirit, Paul and Silas maintained a God-directed attitude and energy, and a vocal one at that. How admirable, and how difficult to do in our own lives! When pressed and pressured, it is easy to lose sight of the spiritual truths we recite in church, and to sink into our lower nature. It is easier to retreat into emotional hurt and victim-hood, depression, and even rage, than to lift up our voice in trusting praise and prayer to the God who has promised to be with us always. Where is, we wonder, the God of truth and light, the God of justice and compassion and wisdom? Are we truly alone after all? Where did all of our strength, our confidence, our happiness, go? Can we get it back, and how?

The earthquake was both physical, shaking the foundations of the prison, and spiritual, shaking the foundations of the jailor's life. Thinking that he would be executed by his superiors for dereliction of duty, he was ready to end his life. Convinced that the Most High God of the singers' faith had just demonstrated his judgment upon him for his religious beliefs, he lost hope, and drew his sword. In a moment of time his world became a dead end, rather than a seedbed that would bring forth new possibilities.

We can hardly blame him for his despair. We can only look at those times in our own lives when everything conspires to destroy our dreams, pressure us unmercifully, and call into question our everyday sense of competence. Back to beginner status we go, as though we had never learned or accomplished anything of lasting worth. Fortunately, Paul and Silas detected the jailor's state of mind, and prevented his suicide.

Trembling with the emotional overload of his narrow escape, and wondering what he was going to do now, he asked the two prisoners how to save himself, both from the anger of his superiors, and from this powerful god's judgment. Having lost all sense of security, all sense of competence, rendered powerless in the face of stark reality, he did not know where to go, what to do, how to fix the situation. Ah, the place where God can begin to work miracles! This rough tough soldier, reduced to a trembling awestruck fearful place, reached outside of himself to the only ones who seemed to have a grasp of the situation, those two bloodied strangers who not only sang praises and prayers, but also stayed put rather than trying to escape.

The question that was wrenched from him opened the door for Paul and Silas to share their faith in the Lord. Their answer encompassed the physical and the spiritual rather than separating them. In this prison, into which they were unjustly placed, Paul and Silas kept in perspective the larger reality of the God who brings light and hope into the darkest places imaginable. They knew that what was going on was not limited to a miscarriage of justice and a strange earthquake. They knew that in this place, symbolic of both the inner and outer slavery of human beings, whether overlords or the powerless, a cosmic battle was being waged. They saw that it had political implications. Their faith in the Lord told them that the most powerful political and military institution in the known world of the time, the Roman Empire, could not stand in the way of the Lord's power to transform people's lives, even the lives of those who were paid by that Empire to maintain its crushing grip on its subjects.

So they, Jewish followers of the Lord, said to him, an employee of the state and a Gentile who believed in the Roman state gods, what seemed a strange and wonderful thing, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household". That is, place the weight of your life, place your use in the world, place your beginning and your ending, in the hands of the invisible divine Christ, whose reality is a deeper one than all the walls and weapons and stratagems and prejudices of this world, and whose love for all is unstoppable. An exceedingly bold statement, given in the local stronghold of the Empire's justice system, the Empire that forbade the proselytizing by non-Roman religions within its cities.

They were invited to the jailor's home, where they shared more of what they believed, and why; and all present were baptized into that faith. And the jailor himself did the work of a skilled servant, cleansing and bandaging Paul and Silas' wounds, and feeding them, returning compassion for compassion, faith for faith, good deed for good deed.

Freed by the power of the Lord from the fear of physical and spiritual death into a new quality of life, he did for his prisoners that which he would never have dared to do otherwise. Freed to live for God first rather than the Empire, he switched his ultimate allegiance to the living Lord, and began to live into that allegiance.

This story is one reason why we have the Book of Acts. It tells us how those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah lived out their faith within an indifferent and hostile world. It tells us how the Christian church grew beyond a small Jewish sect in the far eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, making its way into Syria, Turkey, Africa, Greece, Italy, and far beyond. It reveals the cosmological conflict waged by those who understood that spiritual powers and principalities lay hidden behind political intrigue, and social, cultural, racial, sexual, and religious

barriers. It records how far they were willing to go in their proclamation of the Lord's truth, even to those who imprisoned and persecuted and killed them.

We are meant to be encouraged rather than intimidated by this collection of stories. It is possible, by the Lord's guidance and power, to touch the lives of those around us. There is a way out of our own inner bondage, and we can be used to woo others out of theirs. This church has a history of welcoming people who don't 'fit' into other religious bodies due to marital status, gender identification, woundedness of soul, and a questing mind that looks for a home, and folding them into a living spiritual community of love and truth. It is not by our own cleverness or brilliance that this is so, but rather by allowing the Spirit of the Lord to work in and through who we are and what we believe and how we conduct our lives.

Paul and Silas acted in accordance with the inner freedom they knew as followers of Jesus. That inner freedom came to the fore while they were locked up in prison. The love and truth of God could not be stopped by the authority of the state. Singing and praying, they brought light into the prison, both literal and symbolic, in which they were incarcerated. The walls of that prison were not as powerful and limiting as the Empire had intended. In responding to the hidden realities of the universe, Paul and Silas opened up the way for the Lord to act within those stone walls and prison guards and iron shackles.

In doing so, they became an answer to the prayer of Jesus: **(John 17:20-26):** *"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."*

What must we do to be saved from the dilemmas and pains and stresses of our lives that threaten to undo us? And if we need to be saved from something, what are we being saved for? Singing and praying open us up to God's possibilities and God's peace, but if that were all it took, both we and this world would be in far better shape than we are at the present moment. The story of Paul and Silas and the prison warden is a way of telling us that the One we seek is present within every detail as well as the broad sweep of our lives. It tells us that we are only a breath away, a decision away, a choice away, from a life that is able to see through our own prison walls, beyond the outer differences that separate us from one another, beyond the large and small annoyances and challenges of life, to the reality of the loving and compassionate Lord, who holds us all in the palm

of his hand. That breath, that decision, that choice, may be for the very first time, or for the thousandth time. Salvation is a particular moment, as well as a process. Salvation is individual, and also corporate. Salvation is spiritual and physical, personal and political. Salvation is not something we do, or work ourselves into; it is something we are.

What is important for you and me now is to put what we know into action on behalf of our neighbor, whether near or far. We experience freedom, and act on behalf of others, imperfectly, haltingly, with many missteps along the way. But the story of the Book of Acts continues to give witness to the power of the Spirit to guide us beyond where we are now, for the good of the community, and as our own answer to Jesus' prayer. That is what we are being saved for.

May it be so for each of us, and for all of us. Amen.