

WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?

This was the cry that came from the jailer who was keeping watch over Paul and Silas as they were in prison while in Philippi. We read of the account in Acts 16. The events leading up to their imprisonment were as follows. Paul and Silas entered the city of Philippi to bring the Gospel to that region. They were met by a woman who was under a demonic influence being

used by and for the profit of her masters. Paul after several days turned and rebuked the demonic spirit from the woman and she was set free, much to the displeasure of her masters. Paul and Silas were thrown into prison for bringing "trouble (to) our city" and "teaching customs" contrary to what the residents of Philippi were to live by. At that time, the Philippians were under the "spiritual" influence of their Greek gods, as well as under the governmental rule of Rome that decreed their emperor was a god. Paul and Silas were taken, beaten, thrown into prison and placed into stocks to secure their captivity.

As we continue on, we read that Paul and Silas, as they were in this horrible situation, began to worship and sing praises to their God in which everyone in the prison heard them. As they were worshipping and singing their praises, we read of what took place next in Acts 16:26-28, *"Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed. And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here."*

Paul and Silas were cast into prison. Their "so called" crime was that of preaching and teaching ways that were "contrary" to the ways and beliefs of the city they were in. No doubt, this jail keeper had heard from their accusers what Paul and Silas were "guilty" of concerning speaking the Good News of salvation through a God they called Jesus. We must remember that the preaching and teaching concerning salvation from your sins and living a life in eternity having a personal and intimate relationship with a "god" was truly "foreign" to this Gentile, pagan region.

This region worshipped their Greek gods. These gods were someplace far way and really didn't care too much about the people that worshipped them. However, the common thought and belief was that if you were nice to the gods they may be nice to you – if they felt like it. It was also commonly thought that the gods would use people as "pawns" in their rivalries with other gods as well as for their own purposes. The concept of "salvation" from your sinfulness and having a true relationship with a god through the death of the son of a god was indeed strange and contrary to the Philippians' way of thinking. To them, there was really no concept of an afterlife and the notion of being saved from the consequences of your sin through the death of someone else, especially a god, was total "foolishness" to them.

The jail keeper knew of their "crime." We can also be quite certain that this jailer had heard the singing and praising by Paul and Silas to their God as they were in their prison cell. Suddenly, the jailer experiences the trembling of the earth that mysteriously only happens at the site of this prison. We do not read that anyone else had experienced an earthquake anywhere within the vicinity. The jailer sees the rubble and sees all the prison doors opened, not just that of Paul and Silas, but **all** the doors were askew and cast open of all the prisoners. Being responsible for the keeping of the prisoners and seeing the doors all open, his immediate thought was that they all escaped. This meant that he would be killed for his negligence. Instead of going through the humiliation of a trial and execution, he decides to commit suicide. However, as he draws his sword, he hears Paul cry out that all the prisoners were still there. What? All the prisoners were still there? Instead of falling on his sword, the jailer falls to his knees.

The keeper of the prison came trembling to Paul and Silas on his knees. He cried out to them the question, "*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*" This man had come to the place where he recognized his total need for the God that Paul and Silas were preaching about. He was at the place in his life that Jesus refers to as being "poor in spirit." (Matthew 5:3)

Being "poor in spirit" was the very first precept that Jesus taught in His very first major teaching (the Sermon on the Mount - Matthew 5-7) to His very first disciples. It is fundamental to the Gospel message. The primary "heart condition" for any individual to receive salvation is that their heart must recognize its need for God within their life. This jailer's heart was "primed" for this. He had heard the message, as well as the praises of Paul and Silas. Something strange was going on within him. He had a good job. He had a family that was being provided for through this job. He had authority within the prison and most likely was a prominent citizen within his community. However, something was missing. Somewhere deep inside of his heart this message concerning Jesus was resonating. Could this Jesus be the very thing that would truly give him what he was looking for? Could this Jesus that Paul and Silas were speaking of really be the true God.

Suddenly, through the events that took place within the prison, everything this jailkeeper had trusted in for his daily living was shattered. This God that Paul and Silas worshipped was not only great and powerful but He also cared about Paul and Silas. This God cared so much for those that believed in Him that He set them free by bringing forth an earthquake. However, the jailer may have first thought that this God did not care about him. He thought his life was now in ruins along with the prison. In his mind his world was shattered. The only option he could think of was to kill himself. Then he heard Paul cry out that they were all there. Something "clicked" within this jailer's heart. He realized that everything within him that he was trusting in was nothing but "things" that could vanish in the wind. In that moment he recognized that what he really was looking for might possibly be found in this God that Paul and Silas were lifting praises to. Maybe, just maybe, this God did care about him. Maybe, just maybe, this is the true God that he was always seeking after.

He immediately, fell to his knees. He bowed down before the very ones that a few hours earlier he had total control over and was beating them with that sense of authority and power that he was once trusting in. He fell to his knees in total recognition that he needed what they had. In that instant of falling to his knees, with no one saying anything, his heart was now a heart that was a repentant heart. This man was primed; recognizing his need for God and wanting to know what he must do to be saved. Paul's response was a simple one. There was nothing else this man needed to do but "*Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ...*"

We see a similar "heart" that was primed for the Good News of salvation through Jesus in the well-known account of Zacchaeus. We are all familiar with the account. However, I would like to touch on a few points that we may overlook as we read this account. We see that Zacchaeus was the "chief tax collector" of the region of Jericho. This of course meant that he was not looked upon kindly by anyone. He was also looked upon as the "lowest of the lowest" of sinners by the Pharisees. It also meant that he was very rich, as the account tells us. However, we get a glimpse of what was actually happening somewhere deep within his heart. With everything he had, he was lacking something deep within. Most likely it was a need to be loved and accepted simply as a person.

In the account we see that he had heard that Jesus was in town. He most likely had previously heard about Jesus and the "buzz" that this could be the Messiah. He quickly went on ahead of Jesus and found a place in a tree to get a glimpse of this possible Messiah. Could this be the very thing that deep down in his heart he was searching for? Could this Jesus be the one who would be able to bring, not only deliverance to Israel but also deliverance to his aching heart? Zacchaeus' heart was a prime candidate for salvation. As soon as Jesus saw Zacchaeus, he saw a man whose heart recognized its need for God. As Jesus dined with

Zacchaeus, we see that again, without any prompting by anyone, Zacchaeus in his own way walked in a heart of true repentance. He not only made things right from that moment on by giving half of what he had to the poor, but he also made right to those he had cheated even before his encounter with Jesus. Zacchaeus recognized his need for God, he became "poor in spirit" and Jesus, in saying that salvation has come to that house that day, was telling Zacchaeus that the "Kingdom of heaven" would now be his.

In both of the above scenarios, we see that they both had hearts that were prepared and ready to receive the seed of the message of the Good News. Their hearts were good soil for the seed of the message of salvation through Jesus to be planted and not wither away, but rather bring forth that 30, 60 and 100 fold fruit within their lives.

But what is that "seed" of salvation that needs to be planted into a heart that is truly ready to receive and accept Jesus as their Messiah, as their Savior and as their Lord? I believe that "seed" is the message John the Baptist declared which was the "cornerstone" of his ministry in preparing the way for the Lord. The message that John declared was a simple one, "**Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.**" (Matthew 3:2) We see that Jesus began His ministry with the same message that John left off with after John was imprisoned. "**Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand**" (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:14,15). The preliminary to anyone receiving and accepting Jesus as their Lord and Savior is recognizing their need for God (being "poor in spirit") which leads to a heart of truly desiring to repent and turn from their wicked, sinful ways.

We see that in the days of Jesus and John the Baptist, this was the common thread as well as the common accepted understanding for those that truly desired to "turn towards God." Repentance was not considered a harsh message. It was not considered a harsh preaching of the Good News of salvation. Quite the contrary. It was embraced and received by those whose heart was "primed" for a new way of life. They just didn't know where to find. However, with a heart prepared and ready, recognizing its need for God and with an understanding that there was a need to repent and turn towards their God, they found the very thing their hearts were aching for. They found acceptance and forgiveness from a loving, Heavenly Father through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Over the years the Body of Christ has come up with many different approaches to evangelism. I am not saying that these approaches are bad or that they are incorrect. The main problem that I see is that many of these approaches have become "destination oriented" rather than "relationship oriented." We tell people that if they want to go to heaven and have "eternal life" in heaven they need to say a prayer and accept Jesus into their heart. Again, this is not necessarily incorrect. However, Jesus' definition of "eternal life" is not one of destination, although that is a really good perk of our salvation. Rather His definition of eternal life is that of having a relationship that brings us into "oneness" with the Father and His Son, Jesus. In John 17:3, Jesus gives us His definition of eternal life, "**And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.**" Through Jesus, the believer in Christ is now "set at one" again with their God. The relationship that was broken because of sin is now restored and made new through the Blood of Jesus.

I believe that this is the essence and fundamental message of salvation and the Good News of the Gospel of Christ. We were all destined for eternal separation from God. The Father sent Jesus to bring reconciliation and restoration to that relationship. God, through Jesus, made available to every individual a way back into that relationship with their God. The person whose heart has heard this Good News; whose heart has become "primed" and "fertile soil" for the seed of the Good News, is one who has come to that place down deep within their heart where they recognize their need for God (they are "poor in spirit"). It is a heart that is willing and open to repent and change its lifestyle to that of the One they are choosing to follow (Jesus). It is that heart where the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit will gladly make their "resting place."

The scriptures tell us in Romans 10:17 that, "...*faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.*" Paul is referring to "saving faith." "Saving faith" - faith that brings a person to salvation - is faith that believes and accepts the Word of God concerning what opens the door and allows one to enter into that "strait and narrow gate" leading to eternal life which is a restored relationship with God. It is hearing the Word that Jesus and John the Baptist declared, "*Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" Salvation is at hand to those who have ears to hear and a heart that knows it needs something more than what they have. Salvation is near. It is at the door. It will come to that person's "house," their very own being, if their heart is primed and ready to repent and turn towards their God. Salvation is "at hand" for everyone. A restored relationship back to a loving God (eternal life) is "at hand."

The keeper of the jail and Zacchaeus, down deep in their heart, even though they were comfortable in life, had riches and wealth and had their own sense of "power and authority," knew that there must be something more. They were looking for something that would truly satisfy the hunger and thirsting in their heart of hearts. They heard of Jesus and the message to repent. This didn't seem harsh to them nor were they resistant to it but rather they understood and owned up to their sinful heart and received the exhortation to repent. They were ready for it. Jesus then proceeded to come by their way.

Salvation (Jesus) was "at hand." Without saying anything, inwardly and then outwardly they expressed what was now in their heart. They both had a heart that was truly repentant and they were both willing to change their lifestyle to that of the One they were now choosing to follow (Jesus). In both of the accounts Jesus declared that salvation had come to their "house," their heart. (The keeper of the jail - Acts 16:34; Zacchaeus - Luke 19:9). Of course, the completed action for Zacchaeus' salvation was after Jesus' death and resurrection. The jailer's salvation was accomplished the moment he recognized his need for God, repented and "believed" making Jesus his Lord and Savior.

What must I do to be saved? "*Believe in the **LORD** Jesus Christ (**repent and make Him your absolute, supreme and final authority in your life) and you shall be saved...*"

**Words in parenthesis added by this writer