

THE WAY OF SALVATION

Acts 16:13-40

Paul, Silas, and Luke are now in Philippi. In this noted city our Oriental travelers found their first resting-place on European soil. Because Paul was a newcomer in the city of Philippi, it is interesting to observe his conduct. He hunted the prayer-meeting group. What crowd do you hunt when you are in a strange place? The answer will reveal your true character.

Their first inquiry must have been for a place where their message might gain a hearing. And it seems to have soon appeared that there was no synagogue in the city, an indication that there were very few Jews "in the colony", which indeed was not strange. The evangelists evidently did not think it wise to begin in the marketplace. In seeking a place to preach, they went to the "Praying Place." This was outside the city walls. From what they had heard they supposed that they had found a place where it was customary to meet to pray. There were not enough "devout" souls in Philippi to form a synagogue; but by common consent here in some retired spot on the banks of the little stream, a few, chiefly women, met for prayer, maybe reading the law and chanting the songs of Zion. It is interesting to know that God had a few witnesses in that strange and wicked city. He has never left Himself without a witness in any age or in any place. If there are no men to speak for God, the rocks will cry out in their testimony.

Hither came the evangelistic party, and, sitting in the quiet spot, "spoke to the women that were come together." Would that we might have heard that first message of the Gospel on the new continent. Luke does not tell us what Paul said in that great sermon, but we may be sure that it was the same good news he had preached throughout Asia Minor. As Luke narrates some of the experiences that Paul and Silas and he had in this city, we note that they relate to a woman, a girl, and a man. From what is told of these, we may say that the woman represents Asiatic commerce, the girl represents Greek slavery, and the man represents the Roman government. We are given to see the impact of Christianity upon each of these, and in each case it is victorious. Look at these cases.

I. The Woman. Verses 14-15.

1. Her Home. Verse 14.

The city of Thyatira was located on the banks of the Lycus, in the province of Asia, in western Asia Minor. At that time it was noted chiefly as a Macedonian colony, and stood in the territory in which the missionaries for some unexplained reason were forbidden at that time to proclaim the Gospel. It was a city of diversified industries.

2. Her Occupation. Verse 14.

Lydia was a business woman. In those days women were not ordinarily engaged in the world's traffic. But for the sale of the wares manufactured in Thyatira, especially the colored fabrics and robes, we can well imagine the service of a capable woman would be well-nigh indispensable. Lydia was a seller of purple. She was evidently prosperous and in good circumstances, with a house large enough, and means affluent enough, to entertain the missionary deposition from the Syrian capital.

3. Her Character. Verse 14.

Lydia was a Jewess, or at least a proselyte to the Jewish faith, and carried her religion with her business, even though she went far from home. On this particular Saturday she was at the "place of prayer," at the riverside, and this seems to have been her custom. Waiting for the light she sought the company of those of

like serious mind, in the midst of the abounding idolatries of the Romanized city.

4. Her Conversion. Verses 14-15.

The acceptance by Lydia of Jesus Christ as her Saviour is of special value in our day because it is typical of the change which all must experience, however upright in life and noble in character, if they would be saved. She was a worthy woman, seemingly of admirable character and blameless life; but, although a worshipper of God, she as yet knew not Jesus, and was ignorant of the only true way of salvation. But her heart was opened by the Lord so that she attained unto the things which were spoken by Paul. She was the first Christian convert made in Europe, and a most important part of the work of Christianity in Europe has been the elevation of woman. Lydia's baptism and that of her household followed; and they were all enrolled among the followers of Jesus. The faithful woman could not have been blind to the probable sacrifice this step would involve. Her business would probably be ruined. Her best customers were doubtless among the great of the city. The entire patrician class was not likely to be seen much longer in her house, after it became known that she had aligned herself with these emissaries of an intolerant sect, "everywhere spoken against." But none of these things could keep this faithful woman from the public confession of her faith in her divine Lord and Saviour. The immediate evidences of her conversion were the open heart, the open mind, the open mouth, the open hand, and the open house.

II. The Girl. Verses 16-24.

1. The Demoniactal Possession. Verses 16-17.

As the apostles went to the place of prayer, they were met by a poor girl who was possessed of a spirit of divination, the spirit of the python, the fabled monster serpent that was supposed to guard the shrine of the Delphic Oracle. She followed the evangelists and, impelled by the Spirit that dominated her being, bore testimony to their high character and heavenly mission -- "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim unto you the way of salvation." This she did for many days.

2. The Maid was Delivered. Verse 18.

Paul was sorely troubled by the case of the poor slave-girl. The cause he sought to advance was not to be helped by the involuntary cries of the demoniac. The apostle's heart was doubtless wrung with anguish and sympathy for the afflicted slave, but he endured the trial many days. At last, when he could stand it no longer, he determined to secure her deliverance. But he recognized his own impotence, and invoked the power and mercy of his divine Lord. Paul turned to the loud-mouthed demoniac and said, "I charge thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour."

Here is a pitched battle between truth and error, between love and selfishness. A girl with an evil spirit is being exploited for gain by a number of men.

3. The Missionaries Arrested. Verses 19-24.

A tumult arose when the men to whom the girl belonged saw that their lucrative business had been immediately and irretrievably ruined by these apostles. It was nothing to them that the poor slave had been delivered from bondage to an evil power. Their business had been totally destroyed. They preferred charges against Paul and Silas and dragged them before the magistrates on the pretense that the religious customs of their imperial city were being destroyed, and the people were being seduced to an unlawful religion. They belonged to that group that believes any religion which hurts the pocketbook is an impertinence. The magistrates of Philippi listened to their charges, made no inquiry into the facts, but hastily

stripped the accused, commanded them to be beaten with lictors' rods, and hurried them to prison. There never has been a time when Christianity has been unchallenged, and generally when most fiercely assailed it has been most successful. Christianity thrives not in a hothouse, but in the open and before the blast. Is your Christianity vital, and vigorous, and victorious? It is better to bow to the truth than to be broken by it.

III. The Man. Acts 16:23-40.

1. His Needless Cruelty.

At the command of the officers, the prisoners' clothing was torn to pieces, and they were severely beaten and scourged. With painful welts and bleeding wounds on their backs, Paul and Silas were placed in the custody of the jailer, who was instructed to keep them securely. This cruel and hard-hearted jailer, who apparently had no sympathy for these unfortunate men, violently thrust them into the lowest dungeon, or subterranean part of the prison, which was reserved for the most desperate prisoners. It was an additional mark of cruelty, gratuitous and unnecessary, that down in that dungeon and darkness he clamped their feet in the stocks and compelled them to spend the night in the excruciating torture of a constrained situation in which bodily rest would be an impossibility. Even the slight liberty of movement, which heavy chains would have allowed, was rendered impossible. The dungeon and the darkness and the stocks were needless for the safe-keeping of the imprisoned missionaries. They were the uncalled-for elements of torture roughly applied to suffering saints by an excessively cruel nature.

But his cruel reign was brief. The Lord had thoughts of mercy for His servants, and for their keeper, the jailer, as well.

2. His Conversion. Verses 25-34.

(1) The prisoners prayed and sang.

The Lord was with His servants; and His grace enabled them to triumph over their afflictions. Because their bodies were lacerated with the stripes of the lictors and their feet were fastened in the stocks, Paul and Silas could not sleep. Instead of spending those hours of physical torture in bitter imprecations on their enemies, they prayed and sang hymns of praise unto God. No suffering can still the Christian's song, and no night can hide his light. Christians are still singing their songs in the night. These prisoners had an impromptu and free concert. Perhaps Paul sang the "air" and Silas the "part."

(2) The Lord manifested His power by delivering His servants.

While God was giving them songs in the night, His power suddenly came down, and there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the jail began to tremble, the walls reeled to and fro, the iron bars were twisted, every door flew open, the chains on every prisoner were loosed, the shackles were unfastened, the prisoners screamed, sprang to their feet, and rushed from the dangerous building. There was here a manifest intervention of God, in which the prisoners and their jailer were alike concerned. The jailer realized this, and while his first hurried impulse was to anticipate the judgment of death, which he knew awaited him if his prisoners had escaped, his next and profoundest conviction was that he was in the power of One mightier far than Rome, and that he was exposed to the blastings of His wrath.

(3) The jailer asked life's supreme question, "What must I do to be saved?"

He came to the sudden and overwhelming realization that he was a lost man, but not lost because of any dereliction of duty to the magistrates. He had the awful concern of a soul self-condemned for the sins of an iniquitous life, standing at the bar of a just and holy God. How had he, an ignorant heathen, come

to an understanding of his sinful nature, his relations to a supreme being, and the claims of a Divine Law? The answer is not far to seek. He was living under the reign of law; and he had learned the nature of wrong-doing as related to human justice. Then too, some people never think about salvation until they are threatened by death.

This is the greatest question he could have asked. He did not ask how to be handsome, decent, respectable, or rich, but how to be saved. His question was asked in an immediate, hasty, earnest, and urgent way. It was a direct, personal, practical question of incomparable importance. A more important question was never propounded by man. His earnest inquiry was not left unanswered. He was not told to do less than was necessary to gain the object sought, which was salvation. He was told just what to do, no more and no less.

- (4) Paul's answer was the message of the Gospel, -- "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house."
Here is the simplest expression of the Gospel that I know.

This question was from one who realized he was lost. The reason we seldom hear it asked today is because men do not realize they are lost. This is a vital matter. No man will seek pardon until he realizes he is condemned. Men will not see a physician until they realize they are sick. They will not cry for help until they realize their distress. The greatest task of a minister is to make men realize their sin and their need of a Saviour.

The jailer's question expressed the chief concern of his life. Never before had he asked such a question; never before had he cared about it. What is the main quest in life for most of us? Men talk much about markets, about current events, about charity, about church; but they talk little about regeneration and salvation. Our most alarming situation is that many people are substituting church-going for salvation. They are substituting a social Gospel for regeneration. They are substituting paying for praying.

The question was the proof that sin was real to him. It may have been the first time in his life that it had been real, but it became very real then. The world has largely lost its sense of the reality of sin. Certain religious cults have told us that sin is not a reality, that it is merely a mistake that will in time adjust itself; and men have been eager to believe this damnable doctrine. As long as sin is a little thing, salvation will be a little thing. If man are not afraid of hell they will not prize heaven. A little devil means a little God.

Paul never denied the awfulness of sin. Nor did he minimize the jailer's need of being saved. He gave an answer so definite, so clear-cut, so simple, and yet so striking that neither this man nor any man after him could miss its meaning. Such preaching is needed today. Paul gave the jailer the only answer to his question. Neither morality nor generosity nor orthodoxy nor ritualism nor public activities in the church will save a man. Christ alone is the hope of our salvation.

The conversion of the jailer marks an epoch in the history of Christianity. It was solely a work of Divine grace. It was contrary to all rules of reason and expectation. It clearly demonstrates that the fear of the Lord exceeds the fear of men and even the fear of death.

This incident teaches us that retribution is one of the positive fruits of regeneration. The jailer took Paul and Silas and washed the stripes he had cut

in their bodies. He wept over the bleeding wounds he had made. This certainly proves a changed attitude and a changed spirit. The soul that has trusted the Lord for salvation wants to undo all the wrong he has done. He no longer takes delight in hurting men, but he seeks ways of undoing the injuries already inflicted. This is one of the finest evidences of a regenerated heart. If you would know whether a professed conversion is genuine or not, look for the stripe washing. If there is a desire to undo the wrongs, and to bind up the bruises made, that is a very good evidence that a change has taken place within the heart. But if there is a disposition to laugh such things away, and to be indifferent toward the ones injured, and to refuse to try to undo the wrongs, then such profession is lacking in the marks of genuineness.

The jailer did not wait until morning to be baptized, because he wanted to do his duty and loved his Lord so much that he could not wait another hour to obey Him. A desire to obey the Lord is another proof of one's salvation. If a man knows his duty toward God and willfully disregards it or refuses to do it, this is strong evidence that something is lacking in his religious experience. Look for obedience to the will of God if you would seek for evidence of conversion. The jailer also loved the ones he had recently hated as is indicated by his taking the apostles into his house and setting food before them.

The jailer was filled with joy. It had been such a short time since he was miserable. His soul had been filled with sorrow, and now it was filled with gladness. He not only rested his faith on God, but he rested everything on God. His mistakes, his sins, his misunderstandings of the apostles, and his wicked deeds were all laid upon the Lord.

The last verses present a remarkable scene. The jail was a wreck. The jailer had become a devout Christian. The town was in a stir. The officials of the city were frightened. They sent underlings to tell the prisoners that they might go free; they were willing to dismiss their cases. Paul shocked them by sending them word that they had openly violated the law and that they could not make amends privately. Thus an embarrassing scene was created, and they did not accept the freedom that was offered them.

The boldness of Paul was commendable. The fact was that they had violated the Roman law and were in danger of losing their positions if not their lives. The officers begged these men to leave town, but they would not do so. The magistrates could not go on streets without meeting the men they hated and of whom they were afraid. That experience greatly advanced the cause of Christianity. It gave a new courage to the band of disciples. It made wicked men afraid to lift their hands against the followers of Christ. Paul and Silas remained in the city for some days encouraging the Christians.