

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (24-10-1999 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Acts 16:25-40

The Philippian jailer

Introduction

There were three conversions in Philippi that we read of in Acts 16, one by the riverside (Lydia), one on the roadside (slave girl), and now we come to the one by the fireside. The story of the Philippian jailer introduces us to two great Christian words connected with conversion. There are many parallels with the story of Lydia – the Word of God as the instrument, and the resulting baptism and changed life demonstrated in hospitality and kindness. But we are going to concentrate on the question and answer found in verses 30-31, which give us the two words “Saved” and “Believe”: **“What must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”**

The reason for the question

The ways in which people come to Christ vary greatly, though the end goal is the same. By nature we are proud, independent, self-satisfied, self-righteous, thinking we do not need a Saviour, and self-willed, wanting to run our own life. The Holy Spirit changes this, making us humble, dissatisfied with self, convicted of sin and a sense of being in the wrong with God. Some of us are led to this by gentle steps, a gradual dawning of truth on our souls, over many months, maybe even years. It is a “still small voice” that we experience. But for others, and the Philippian jailer is one such, it involves a more brutal, sudden awakening.

The jailer was a hardened legionary, who had been through many battles and faced death constantly. He was tough. Nothing scared him. He had no previous preparation by the reading of the Word. Then one night, terror struck, and the tough man found himself in fear of the worst and ready to commit suicide (Soldiers were expected to kill themselves if their lost their prisoners.).

There was an earthquake that night. Earthquakes had a special relevance to Roman soldiers, who were very superstitious about them. Even the stoutest heart trembled at an earthquake. C.f. the Roman soldiers guarding Christ’s tomb became “like dead men” when the earth quaked (Matthew 28:4).

Paul and Silas were very different prisoners from the ones the jailer was used to. He was used to violent, cursing, swearing prisoners, but he had never met any who sang praises to God at midnight, in the midst of their pain. He had never met any refusing the chance to escape when the opportunity arose. **Do not harm yourself. We are all here** (Acts 16:28). These were no ordinary prisoners. Clearly their God was greater than any Roman God (e.g. Jupiter) that he knew of. He was totally shaken, hovering between life and death. No wonder he fell down trembling, asking “What must I do to

be saved?” The hard Roman veteran, trembling before two wandering Jewish preachers just after they had had a cruel beating and torture in the stocks!

God still uses these contrasting methods to awaken men and cause them to think seriously about eternity. Jesus used two methods – an appeal of love to some, and rousing fears of death and hell in others. And throughout the Christian life, we are caused to stop and think. Our reactions are different when we go through adversity, but it often takes adversity to drive us to our knees and bring us back to God. In witness and in preaching we need these two weapons – the love of God, and the fear of hell. Jesus used both.

### What do we understand by “saved”?

The very name Jesus takes us to the heart of the Christian message. **You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins** (Matthew 1:21). **For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost** (Luke 19:10). **I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation** (Romans 1:16). **Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners** (1 Timothy 1:15). If it is not clear that Christianity is a message of Salvation, we have missed the point!

No doubt the Philippian jailer had heard Paul preaching about this in the streets, or heard his testimony in prison. Paul would have spoken of being “saved”, not from trouble, difficulties or ill health, but from sin and everything to do with sin. Sin spoils character, robs of peace and keeps out of heaven. We need to grasp the penalty, the power and the presence of sin – all of which we are and will be saved from.

- (1) The penalty of sin. Self is in the centre of our life, and not God. We want to go our own way, to break God’s laws in deed and thought, deliberately and constantly. We are under God’s righteous condemnation and therefore on our way to hell. Christ came to save us from this penalty. Through His death, in the purposes of God, this penalty was transferred to Him. He stood in my place. He suffered my death sentence. He was separated from God. On the basis of His death, sin can be dealt with, I can be forgiven, cleansed, pardoned, receive mercy, and become a member of God’s family.
- (2) The power of sin. I sin because I am a sinner. I have a fallen nature, a nature which pulls me down and is the source of sin. God’s answer to this downward pull is to give new life through the Resurrection power of Christ. The life of God enters the soul. **God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts** (Galatians 4:6). There can be power where once there was weakness, deliverance in answer to slavery, holiness in place of sin. Divine power is victorious and triumphant over the power of sin.
- (3) The presence of sin. One day, at Christ’s Second Coming, we will be delivered from the presence of sin. We will be perfectly conformed to His image. **We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is** (1 John 3:2). There will not only be an end of crying, tears and pain, but an end of sin itself.

The whole source and cause of Salvation is the Lord Jesus Christ – His atoning death, the power of His resurrection, and His glorious return. Here is the heart of the Gospel. The humiliating part is that it comes as a gift – we can either take it on those terms, or not have it at all. It cannot be earned by our achievements. It only comes from God’s gracious hand. It cost Him everything and us nothing. When we humble ourselves and take the gift, the result is joy. **The jailer was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family** (Acts 16:34). A few hours earlier he had been in black despair, with suicide as the only way out. Now he is exultant and jubilant. His whole situation had been transformed by Christ.

This is what the Gospel does. **You believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy** (1 Peter 1:8). **May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him** (Romans 15:13). **You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand** (Psalm 16:11). Joy in the Lord because of salvation and blessing was a true Old Testament and New Testament experience.

In the early nineteenth century, becoming a Christian was known as “becoming serious”. Hudson Taylor said, “Judging by the faces of some professors, it is a very serious matter indeed. How much better if they had tell-tale faces showing the blessing and joys of salvation, so that non Christians would have to call conversion “becoming joyful” rather than “becoming serious””.

#### What do we understand by “believe in”?

How does this all become real? How does this become mine? How can I be saved? What is the key that unlocks the treasure? The answer is “believe in”, or “believe on”. Turn from and turn to. Turn from sin and present way of life, and turn to Christ, placing all confidence and reliance in Him. Like a drowning man placing himself in the hands of his rescuer, or a patient placing himself in the hands of the surgeon. There needs to be this total trust. Like walking over a bridge, we place our full weight on it, not just part. So we must place our self in God’s hands, because He alone has all authority and power to save.

The empty vessel of my life needs to be filled with Christ. Be agreeing to be nothing, and taking Him to be all, I take my eye off self and put my eye on Christ. It may be a weak trust to begin with, with many doubts and feelings of my own defilement. But if it is real, then this step brings salvation. I only need to touch the hem of His garment, and admit Him to be my only means of salvation. I allow Him to do whatever He wills, in total submission. When He saves, He takes total control as Master

Sir James Simpson, who discovered Chloroform, records how, as a young boy at school, he saw an unforgettable sight in his native town. A man was tied to a cart, his back bleeding and torn from the lash. Had he committed many offences? No, only one. None of the town people offered to share the punishment with him. He bore the penalty of the law alone. Then years later as a student at Edinburgh University we saw another unforgettable sight. A man was brought out to be hanged. His arms were pinioned, and his face pale as death. Thousands of eager eyes were on him as he came from the jail. No man asked to die in his place. No friend came forward to loosen the noose, and say put it round my neck instead. Had the man committed many crimes?

No, only one. He had stolen a money parcel from the stagecoach. He bore the penalty of the law alone. (This was the last instance of capital punishment for this offence.) Then another sight – “I saw myself as a sinner, on the brink of ruin, deserving hell. For one sin? No, for many sins committed against the unchanging law of God. I looked again. I saw Jesus my substitute, scourged in my place and dying for me on the Cross. I looked and wept, and was forgiven. My duty is to tell you of that Saviour to see if you will not also look and live.”

### Conclusion

What must I do to be saved from the penalty, the power and the presence of sin? The answer is found in Christ. I must make Him mine. This is so urgent and important. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.