

## Acts 16:25-35-22 July 31, 2022 St. John's, Whitewater.

This may sound like a silly question but do you know any real tough people besides the old actor Arnold Schwarzenegger or NFL's line men? I mean someone who chews real steel nails, wears his boots to bed, and who does not simply pump iron but bends iron. I don't either. But I'll bet you've met people in your life whom you looked at & shuttered because they could do you real harm and make life real miserable for you if they wanted to. When we were young we used to call such people bullies, didn't we?. And in our dreams we usually try to figure out how to avoid them or somehow conquer them. We usually don't give it a thought how to convert them or make them Christian, do we?

Ever have any thoughts or dreams about being a missionary, or a better witness for Jesus? If so, this Scripture before us is a dream come true. It's about the conversion (the making of a Christian) of a jailer – a tough unbelieving jailer who had to have the stomach to make raging wrong doers suffer in his jail. This is the fascinating story of **HOW A TOUGH MAN WAS CONVERTED** to Jesus. Or about how to convert the tough cookies in your life! It will help us understand 1. how conversion happens, 2. how to use law and gospel correctly in our witnessing, and 3. how to suffer pain with a smile. Ready?

1. Just how WAS this tough jailer converted? First of all, **THE GREAT QUESTION WAS ASKED**: "What must I do to be saved?"

But there were many things that led that tough guy to ask that question. Many things! Like Christians were mistreated on his watch. The Christians, Paul and Silas, had been preaching the gospel and baptizing the repentant in the city of Philippi. And in their ministry there they came across a demon possessed slave girl that could predict the future; and earning tons of money for her owners doing it. She had followed Paul and Silas for days in Philippi, and in a very obnoxious way – by shouting – told everyone what these missionaries were doing. Until one day God moved Paul to cast the demon out. And there went the girl's ability to tell the future; and there went the big money that her owners were making off her fortune telling. Madder than mad, her owners accused Paul and Silas of being big time trouble makers and got a mob to attack them. That made these Christians LOOK guilty as could be. The law enforcement agencies there made a hasty conclusion based on looks and decided to beat Paul and Silas and put them into the maximum security part of their jail – and for added punishment (think cruelty), put their ankles in wooden stocks. The Christians, Paul and Silas, could have gotten really discouraged and depressed here. They could have easily concluded: our mission effectiveness is over in this city. We are failures. Or worse: found fault with God for abandoning them while doing his work. But once again, one of the things that LED UP to this tough guy being converted and asking the BIG Q, was Two Christians being mistreated on his watch.

There was another thing that led up to this tough cookie asking that Big Q – the two mistreated Christians prayed & praising God thru their sufferings. That jail in Philippi probably never heard people react to suffering that way – praying and singing to God. Here were 2 people- Christians, obviously **not** discouraged by the bad stuff happening in their lives and **not** finding fault with God tho they were suffering unjust pain & suffering. **Why not?** They knew and had already experienced the truth of Jesus' words: "**The world hated me. It will hate you, too.** They had not forgotten Jesus' words in his sermon on the Mt: **Blessed are you when people insult you & persecute you & falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. REJOICE & BE GLAD because GREAT is your reward in heaven. For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.** So with

huge back pain from being beaten with rods & with severe cramping in their legs because of the stocks, these 2 Christians did what God wanted them to do in time of trouble: pray for help, deliverance & strength & sing praise to Him for past help & happy blessings. We are told that the other prisoners listened to them. From the jailers reaction & big Q we knew he too listened to them before he left to hit the sack with his family at home (a home probably attached to the jailhouse). What he heard – so there is no confusion on this – were 2 Christians suffering unjust pain, praying together & singing praise to the Lord. It happens, by the way, that the worst place & the worst time we might think to do mission work is really the best place & the best time to do mission work. The prayers & the hymns in pain – they were a definite prelude to the Big Question!

But there was something else that led up to that big Q (What must I do to be saved?). It was an earthquake. We are told it was a VIOLENT earthquake. It shook hard, not simply the walls, but the foundations of the prison! Can you imagine the fear that must have seized everyone there when it felt like you about to be buried alive under tons of rock. Then, all at once, all, all of the prison doors opened & everyone's chains came loose. Think of that. Not one person dead, but not one door left locked, not one chain in tact. It was like shooting a shotgun at a flock of banded geese. Every shotgun pellet hits & breaks all the bands off but not one goose is hit by the pellets. Awesome is the selective might of a gracious God, hey? And right at the time when Paul & Silas were praying & singing to God. Right at that time. Ah, yes, the timing – it was another thing that had to lead to the big Q that a tough jailer asked.

Perhaps you remember what happened next. The jailer woke up & saw the prison doors wide open. he assumed the prisoners had escaped. He knew that Roman law held him accountable: he would be shamed & then executed for allowing the prisoners to escape. To avoid the shame & public execution he drew his short sword & was about to commit suicide. Paul, a loving, caring Christian, shouts, **Don't harm yourself!** Then Paul tells him what, in the dim light, he could not know, but needed to know to immediately change his mind: **We are all here!** (They were all there cuz God does not promote rebellion against authorities).

Now, it's time to realize what had to be racing around in the jailer's mind. Because of a violent earthquake and with his suicide attempt – he had just stood at the edge of eternity twice in a matter of secs. He had looked death in the face twice. His conscience, which everyone has, told him he was going to meet his maker, the judge of all mankind. The earthquake had removed from him all high ideas that he was controlling his own destiny. That's why we are told he came rushing into the jail with lights and FELL TREMBLING before Paul and Silas. This tough guy was now in despair of saving himself. He had now given up hope of saving himself. He now knew that he was NOT good enough to be saved. And the kind hearted shout of a Christian genuinely concerned about his wellbeing told him these were the guys to ask about eternal things. So he asked the BIG Q: **Sirs, what must I do to be saved?** Embedded in that Q was the thinking: You Christians behave so differently & kindly in pain & persecution. You live as if you have a connection to God. You seem to have the big answers – to life & to death. You seem to be praying to a God who actually answers you. And those beautiful hope-inspiring hymns – what do they mean? Is there hope for me too. **Sirs, what must I do to be saved?**

Usually God does not use an earthquake to make people aware of their need for salvation from hell. Most often it's a mild heart attack or chest pain that feels like one, a slight stroke, a small tumor, a micro- scopic virus, an accident, some life crisis, some unspoken law that ploughs open the hard heart – where we learn: we are not in control. And always in the path of such a person God puts a Christian, some one like you or me

who knows how to pray in trouble & sing about God's goodness, God's grace in Christ no matter what the circumstances, someone like you or me who knows the answer to the Big Q: What must I do to be saved.

2. And the answer, **the only correct answer** is this in brief: **BELIEVE IN THE LORD JESUS AND YOU WILL BE SAVED – YOU & YOUR HOUSEHOLD.** Notice that answer is not: DO something! But TRUST Someone. Trust in the Lord Jesus. He saves. Not: "This is now how you must live, think & feel to be saved." But: "**Believe in the Lord Jesus & you will be saved.**"

Paul and Silas then told the good news of Jesus in detail to the terrified jailer and his family. (That's what v. 32 is saying when it says they spoke the Word of God to the jailer and to all with him)

Let me give you an example of what Paul and Silas DID NOT say – Something that many people THINK is gospel but is NOT: "*Listen, Mr. Jailer, I hear you asking the right question. Now this is what you must DO. GIVE your heart to Jesus. INVITE Jesus into your life. SURRENDER yourself to Jesus. ACCEPT him.*" All pretty nebulous, fuzzy, stuff, isn't it?!

Here's another example of what Paul and Silas did NOT SAY – again something many people think is gospel but is NOT: "*Listen Mr. Jailer. This is what you must do. It's up to you. If you want to be a Christian you must first renounce your old life of sin and wickedness. You must drastically change first. You must first give up our covetous gambling and your dependence on alcohol. And lose all that weight; make your body a fit place for the Lord. Love the Lord and hate all evil with a PERFECT hatred and then, then you will be saved.*" All, pretty, hard, gagging stuff, isn't it?

Now let me give you an example of what Paul & Silas DID say – pure unconditional gospel to a sinner already terrified by the law & asking: WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED. "*Listen, Mr. Jailer (& you too Mrs & you children old enuf to understand! Stop thinking you have to DO any thing TO BE SAVED. Just be very quiet & listen. Listen. When you were still his enemies Jesus did something wonderful for you because the Father did not withhold his Son, his only Son for you. In JC you have been redeemed, forgiven & accepted by God. How did it happen? **When the fullness of time had come, God the Son, your Savior Jesus, left heaven because all its glory was not something to be desired when you were lost. He came down from his exalted throne to this his planet & at heaven's appointed hour he was born & laid in a lowly manger for you, Mr. Jailer & for your family. He grew up, lived a perfect life, suffered terrible shame & rejection & died - all so that you might be honored by the angels & be accepted by God. **FOR your sake he become poor so that you thru his poverty might be rich.** He was treated the way you deserve that you might be treated the way he deserves. He wore a crown of thorns that you might wear the crown of life. He paid the price that you might enjoy – cost free to you - the inheritance. Anyone saved is saved by his works not theirs. All things necessary for our salvation have been done, Mr. Jailer. Thru the doing & dying of Jesus God HAS reconciled the world to himself & that world includes you. By his death on the cross you are pardoned. Believe it. By his resurrection from the dead he has promoted you to being an heir of God. Just trust or believe this Good News. And that's not all! Even now God the Holy Spirit is present to give you faith thru the hearing of this good news. It is his work to create faith in our hearts as the good news of Jesus is heard. He too with the Father & the Son loves you & comforts you. Right now, he is giving you faith to accept his acceptance of you, to believe in Jesus so that you may KNOW that in him you HAVE eternal life. He that believes & is baptized shall be saved."*** THAT'S real, unconditional good news gospel! IN DETAIL!!!

Because the jailer and his whole family believed it – that is, accepted the fact that God in Christ accepted them, they were all baptized – all of them even the children too young to understand.

( For the record, when you are baptized, you're not baptized Luth, or Cath or whatever, you're baptized Christian. You're baptized into the name of the Fa, and of the Son and of the HS, ie, into God's family.

Why were the Jailer and his family baptized after instruction in the gospel. 1. Baptism is God's loving & gracious command. 2. God ties salvation directly to Baptism when he says in Jn. 3:5: **Unless a person is born again of water & the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh (sin produces sin) but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.** 3. God also puts the power to lead a godly life into a person via Baptism. In Rom. 6 it's written: **We were buried with Christ thru Bapt into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead....we too may life a NEW LIFE. )**

All this. Just this – giving the correct answer to the big question with the gospel in Word and Sacrament – did something dramatic to the tough jailer. It changed him. His pagan cruelty & callousness to others? Gone! Instead he washed Paul's & Silas' wounds & fed them a meal. His terror of dying? Gone! Instead he & his whole family were filled with joy. Those are the life changes the gospel works in the hearts that believe. We call those life changes "fruits of faith."

In conclusion I want you to realize 3 things. 1. There's no FREEDOM of the human will in conversion – in being made a Christian. We have a free will in building a house, having this job or that job but when it comes to coming to God & being saved, there's no free will. Although Jesus says in one place: **Come unto me**, he says in another place: **No one can come to me except the Father draws him**, & in another place Scripture says. **No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit**, & in another place it says: **Faith comes by hearing God's Word**. So in conversion God makes the unwilling willing & the dead alive or those naturally born into the family of unbelievers born again into the family of God - thru means, thru the good news details of Jesus. Therefore, if you want a person to become a Christian, don't talk to him or her about accepting Jesus. Talk to him about how God because of Jesus Christ accepted us.

**2ndly**, realize that God works conversion with the law proclaimed FIRST. The law *here* was God's unspoken law of a powerful earth quake & getting the tough jailer to come face to face with death. God is constantly working thru this crisis or that crisis to humble a person & ready a heart to hear the message that does not glorify self but God. So be alert to any nagging problem in a your unbelieving friend's life. This could be the door the Lord is opening up & the perfect time for you to reach that person with the gospel. When you understand that a person has been terrified &/or humbled by God in some way, you know it's time to tell him or her the good news. Point to the love Jesus has for sinners, small, medium & very large sinners. Tell them: *Jesus loves you! He died & rose for you too. You're sins have been forgiven by Jesus. His work is finished. Trust him. Now you can live with a real purpose, for his glory not your glory.* Again, be alert to God's unspoken law in a person's life – some problem that makes him ready to hear the gospel from you.

**Thirdly**, realize that God will at times send pain into your life – like he did with Paul and Silas in prison - so you can show others how to handle suffering - with prayer and praise to God.

Trust me, if you can smile while lying in your own sick bed or in the midst of your aches & pains & say to another person: *I know that because of Jesus and His cross, God loves me & I know he shall somehow also make this little suffering of mine work for my good* – you will make that person think about God like he never thought about him before. And you will have a perfect and powerful opportunity to talk about Jesus (IN DETIL!) & convert another tough cookie and save another soul from eternal pain. Amen.

## **Prayer**

**Lord, we take your warning to heart that no one who truly fears, loves and trusts in you is going to be your silent servant, ashamed to acknowledge you before others. Forgive us for the times we excused ourselves by saying “But silence is golden!” to cover up the silence that was simply “chicken.”**

**Jesus, you are food for our soul, the bread of life. Thank you for feeding our souls again today. For those in our lives who are not well fed, give us the insight first of all to see when you open a door for us to talk you up – a health problem they have, some crisis they have. Give us the desire to go thru that door, to tell them about you, the Savior, your loving us, your dying on the cross for us, your rising for us, your forgiving us. Lord, help us be whom you called us to be – witnesses, witnesses of what you have done for us and everyone else so that more might believe in you, trust in you, and be as we are - saved, not damned, saved.**