

Natalie Ford Cowling
 May 16, 2010

Believe
Acts 16:22-36

The story today really begins with ***another story***.

Paul and Silas first encounter a fortune-teller, a woman causing a lot of trouble for them. She keeps screaming about Paul and Silas, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”

She’s ***obviously worried*** that people might believe their way instead of hers. Paul boldly commands an evil spirit to leave her. When it does, she no longer tells fortunes, and therefore is no longer useful to her owners, who were using her for income. She doesn’t know it yet, but she is finally free—no longer exploited, but now her own person, simply a child of God.

Angry about her freedom, and their income drying up, her owners have Paul and Silas beaten and sent to prison.

That’s where our story picks up—
 with Paul and Silas, in the dark, shackled, and behind bars.

And instead of worrying, whining, or even losing hope,
 they start ***praying and singing hymns***,
 sure of the power of God to care for them.

And their prayers are more than answered when the earth shakes,
 the shackles fall off, and the doors fly open.

Instant freedom for all the prisoners.

Even for the jailer—who thinks about suicide after this mishap, but instead asks the question, the question that all of us ask at some point in our lives. It is the question we ask again and again if we’re honest.

What must I do to be saved?

In ***Oklahoma*** this question has a very specific meaning.

It means what must I do to ensure my spot in *heaven*?

What steps must I take to make sure *I’m in*—

An official Christian, going to the right place after death?

In Acts 16 this is *not the original meaning* of the text.
Nor do I believe that God limits such huge questions
to such simplistic answers.

What must I do to be saved?

That jailer wasn't thinking about all the stuff
we've loaded the question with....
he was thinking 'what can I do to get out of this *mess?*',
'what can I do to *survive* this?'
'what *hope* is there for me, and where do you get yours from?'
If he was listening real close to those *prayers and praise songs*,
he may have been thinking,
"ok, what can I do to have some of what you have?"

What must I do to be saved?

I love what Pastor Paul Walaskay said about this in Feasting on the Word
(pg. 526)..., "Has there ever been a more potent question flowing
throughout Christian history?"

What must I do to be saved from the world around me?
How do I get out of the mess of my life—and what a mess it is.
What can I do to survive this situation?
What can I do to have some of the hope others seem to have?

These are the big questions of life—*THE spiritual questions* of humanity.

How many times have we wondered how we were going to *make it?*

How many times have we found ourselves searching for *hope?*

And *where* have we gone to find it?

That jailer saw in Paul and Silas something powerful---
how in their moment of desperation, through their prayers and praises,
a great earthquake released them from prison!

What have *we seen and heard* to convince us
of the power of the Christian message?

Some of us haven't seen or heard enough to believe that Christianity is something to hold onto—that a relationship with *Jesus is truly life-changing*.

Although 76 percent of Americans identify as Christian, only 35 percent believe that Christianity is THE way to eternal life (According to a 2008 Pew Forum survey). Thirty percent of Americans call themselves "spiritual, but not religious," according to a 2009 NEWSWEEK Poll, up from 24 percent in 2005. Stephen Prothero, religion professor at Boston University, has long framed our American situation as "the divine-deli-cafeteria religion", and describes it as "very much in the spirit of Hinduism. People believe they are not picking and choosing from different religions, because they're all the same, he says. "It isn't about orthodoxy. It's about whatever works...." (Newsweek Aug 15, 2009).

But the truth is as people of different faiths, we *DO have differences*. We have very real and important differences, and it would be dishonest and a disservice to all faiths to claim that they are all the same.

I believe that we *can and should learn* much from other faiths, and when appropriate incorporate what we've learned that is good, all the while clinging to the person of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. I believe that a relationship with a living God who has come to earth as one of us, who has lived and died and been raised from death for us, who lives as Spirit in us, makes our faith quite unique, powerful, and distinct from other faiths.

This is why I am a *Christian* and disciple of Jesus Christ. It is my life, my being, the core of who I am and I wouldn't be alive today without it.

Some people claim they have been 'saved' by *other supernatural* occurrences that may or may not lead them to God and a relationship with Jesus.

According to a Gallup poll, approximately eight million Americans claim to have had a *near-death* experience. The effects of these experiences are profound.

I don't have friends or family that have this experience, but I've read that people's lives are changed, some become closer to God, some simply more religious or attuned to the world around them.

Mauro, James "Bright lights, big mystery". Psychology Today, July 1992.

About 50% of children who report near death experiences also see a guardian *angel*.

I have talked to dozens of people who have encountered angels.

I remember a woman who felt a hand upon her in the hospital room, a man who saw an angel keeping him from colliding with an oncoming car. A family who felt their father's presence in the house, and who saw an angel, after his death.

These people drew closer to God, closer to Jesus as a result of these encounters.

Sometimes though people simply become obsessed with angels themselves.

I also know that people *near their own death* have experiences of God's presence. Bebe was telling me about her aunt who saw a vision of heaven and friends welcoming her just days before her own death.

Some people I've known talk about having spoken with God directly, and these experiences prepare them to go home to be with Jesus.

And then there's the *power of prayer*.

So many of us have said to family or friends, "I'll pray for you".

So many of us have had numerous people lift us up in prayer.

And we have seen and heard, and felt the power of these prayers. Not just the power to change the circumstances but also the power that changes the people who pray!

What about you?

What are your experiences of God's power?

Of the supernatural?

Of the power of prayer?

And have you been drawn *closer to God* through those experiences?

Why or why not?

Paul's response to the jailer in our story is ***THE Christian response*** to THE question we all face, a question people have deep down in their hearts when they enter the doors of this church, or come asking for help.

What must I do to be saved?

To get out of this mess? To survive? To have some hope? Or new life?

Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household.

And they ate together and were baptized.

Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

No special formula to recite, or posture to take, or lifestyle to adopt.

Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

Believe in this person who can and will literally change your *life*,
 A person who can make the earth shake and free you from *chains*,
 Who has died to save you from sin, and is alive living in your *heart*,
 Believe in a God who *knows you inside and out* and *loves* you more than
 anyone ever has or ever will.

If you aren't asking the question, ***start right now***—

What must I do to be saved?

Believe. Just believe in Jesus Christ.

We can't *earn* our salvation, *make* it happen, do *tricks* to help it show up.

We just believe, in Jesus.

And talk about new creations---

Well, you know those *infomercials* about the appliance that is really 9 things
 in 1? where the food chopper is also a skillet and a pocketknife and a lighted
 mirror to help you get ready in the morning?

When we believe, we *survive*. We get out of all the mess.

We get the hope, and the faith, and the trust.

We are made new through and through.

We are forgiven.

We are given new life---now and eternally.

Now that's some really ***Good News***.

Believe. Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

Amen.