

Amazing Grace

Part I

Acts 16:19-34

Introduction

In our last discussion, Paul confronted a slave girl who had been the voice of the python – predicting future events by means of demonic insight. This confrontation took place in Acts, chapter 16, and Paul commanded the demon to leave the girl. Immediately, the demon exited and so did the profitable business that the slave’s masters had been enjoying for some time.

As I mentioned in that discussion, these masters were probably priests from the local Apollo temple. This temple honored Apollo, the god of prophecy, and the serpent/python that represented this form of religion.

The exorcism, at Paul’s command, created an explosion from the priests and the population. “Listen, it’s alright for you to pray down by the riverside with the women, but don’t mess with our religious institutions; and most importantly, don’t mess with our profit margin.”

Paul and Silas have robbed the coffers of Apollo’s temple, and Apollo’s leaders explode with anger.

The Grace of God Through Suffering

Let us pick our story back up at that point. Turn to Acts, chapter 16, and look at verses 19 through 22.

But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, “These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.” The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them, and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods.

In order to get the picture, the market place, or in the Greek, the “agora,” was the open forum in

Philippi. In fact, Philippi has been excavated and the very area where Paul and Silas were judged was actually uncovered. On the northwest side of the “agora” was a raised platform with stairs on each side. A podium was there where the two chief magistrates sat to hear and decide civil cases. The city prison was located directly off to one side of the “agora”. The magistrates had officers, called “policemen” in verse 35, who were actually the enforcement officers of the magistrates. Their name in Latin was “Lictors,” from which we get our expression, “You got your licks,” or “You got your beating.”

I found it fascinating that the symbol of this office was a bundle of rods with an axe protruding from the middle, tied together with a red band called the “fasces”. This symbol was actually revived by Mussolini for his “fascist” movement.

The Jews who suffered under Mussolini’s fascist movement were not the first to suffer. According to verse 22, Paul and Silas suffered a beating that would leave their backs a swollen, bleeding mass of lacerated skin.

Suffering in the night

Notice verses 23 and 24.

When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

In other words, this jailer is going to treat Paul and Silas as if they are dangerous, hardened criminals. He takes them to the inner portion of the prison, which could be called a hole or a dungeon, and, even though they are in the maximum security section, this callous, uncaring jailer still puts Paul and Silas in stocks. Stocks were wooden beams that fastened over the criminal’s feet, which meant that they would not even be able to sleep unless they laid on their bloody backs. It would be a miserable night!

What would you do next? Plot your revenge; call your lawyer; nurse your wounds; cry out your story that everyone would know of your innocence; shout obscenities; demand a fair trial; get upset with God that He led you there and allowed this to happen and it is all His fault?!

Songs in the night

Let us find out what they did! Look at verse 25.

But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them;

Imagine that! Loss of blood, hunger, thirst, rat infested dungeon . . .

Silas says, “Hey, Paul, how’re you doing?”

Paul – “Oh my back is an open wound. How about you, Silas?”

Silas – “Same here, I’m so thirsty and my legs are beginning to cramp from the stocks . . . do you think they’ll beat us again?”

Paul – “No, not once they realize they’ve broken the law by beating Roman citizens. By the way, I’m so glad Timothy and Dr. Luke were spared this beating because of their Gentile heritage.”

Silas – “Me too, Paul, but could we use Luke’s medicine now? What are we going to do now?”

Paul – “Well, Silas, I was just remembering the words of our Lord as He said, “Blessed are you when people . . . persecute you . . . because of Me. . . for your reward in heaven is great . . .”. Imagine Silas, right now, we’re considered especially honored and blessed by God – and He’ll reward us in heaven one day because of it. I feel like thanking Him and singing to Him.”

So they prayed; that is, they cast their burden on Him. And they sang; that is, they cast their praise upon Him.

The prison walls echoed with hymns composed only recently by the early church; the inner dungeon resonated with harmony. The other prisoners were listening. In fact, the verb tenses indicate that the prisoners continued to listen intently to Paul and Silas as they continued to pray and sing.

How do you sing at midnight?

1. First, it is an act of compliance. Paul and Silas knew that God was in control, so this could not have happened without God’s permission. To sing to a God who allowed such a thing requires mature compliance.

2. Secondly, it requires mature character. Galatians, chapter 5, verse 22, tells us that one of the fruits of the Spirit is joy. The submission of everyday life to the control of the Spirit produces the fruit of joy, which is, “contented composure regardless of circumstance”.

Perhaps today, you are experiencing a midnight hour. It could be as a result of:

- physical pain and illness;
- difficult circumstances;
- betrayal and abandonment by a close friend or spouse;
- unjust treatment by someone at work or home;
- perhaps from the unsaved, ridicule and rejection for your faith;
- a sense of an “absent” heavenly Father.

Would you ever consider singing in times like these?

Perhaps it was easier for Paul to sing because he was next to Silas and their faith buoyed one another. Well, the church family should do the same.

I find it interesting, ladies and gentlemen, that while Paul and Silas were thrown into prison during the evening hours, it was not until midnight that they began to pray and sing. Perhaps for the first hour or so, they sat in stunned silence; they could not believe it. God had led them to Philippi, they had responded to the Macedonia call, they had left everything dear and familiar to them to come to Europe – and this was their welcome. Maybe they had a silent talk with the Lord. I have no doubt they expressed their concerns and amazement to one another. Maybe there were some moments of frustration – they were human beings! But sometime around midnight, they complied; surrendered.

Will you, Christian? Will you, son or daughter of the King, submit to the things He has planned for you that make you anything but comfortable? Will you sing? Will you praise Him in advance?

Charles Spurgeon said,

Anyone can sing in the day; it is easy to sing when we can read the notes by daylight, but the mature singer is he who can sing when there is not a ray of light to read by . . .

Praising God at midnight is praising Him in advance; worshipping Him before you have an answer from Him. Magnifying the Lord at midnight

reveals the work of the Holy Spirit by bearing the fruit of joy.

The Grace of God Through Salvation

Now look at verse 26. It is not a wonder to me that God responds to their demonstration of praise with a demonstration of His power.

and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

Imagine some state penitentiary – it is midnight and suddenly, the building begins to violently shake. All of a sudden, the security system works in reverse – all the doors swing open, the bars slide to the side, and every criminal is only a short dash away from an escape into the night!

Continue to verse 27a.

When the jailer awoke . . .

Hold it! That tells us that he had slept through the concert. His little dwelling place was attached to the prison house, so this crusty, callous prison warden heard the singing, along with the other prisoners, but he had closed his ears. He might have thought, “Those men are a bunch of ‘kooks’.” He sleeps though the worship service, but he is roused from his sleep by an earthquake.

Ladies and gentlemen, his descendants live among us today. They clock in to the nearest church service and yawn through it all. They are not moved in the slightest by the singing and the praise and worship of God. You know as well as I do that it will take an earthquake to rouse them from their spiritual slumber. And some of you are praying for an earthquake of some sort to jar them from their spiritual complacency.

Well, this jailer jolts out of bed. He looks down the hallway and maybe out a window and sees that the prison house doors are wide open. Then, verse 27b tell us that,

. . . he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.

Now why would he kill himself? Because the Roman code of Justinian declared that if a jailer allowed a criminal to escape, he would be given the sentence of the criminal. It is obvious that there are men in the prison who are on death row. He knows

that he is as good as dead, because men have escaped who have been condemned to die.

Continue to verses 28 through 30.

But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!” And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and after he brought them out, he said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

This is the greatest question in all the world!

This jailer had heard about the priests and the slave girl who was announcing that these men were bringing to Philippi a way of salvation, for he uses the same Greek word for salvation that the servant girl had used. He had evidently heard about the demon that was cast from her. He had heard this new name, Jesus Christ, which had demonstrated greater power than Apollo. He had heard the singing and perhaps, even the prayers.

He was asking, “What do I have to do to get what you men have? What must I do to have power over demons, joy in the midst of suffering, and a God who shakes the earth in order to release His servants?”

Not only had the prison been shaken, but the jailer had been shaken. And now, he asks, “What must I do to be saved?”

John Taylor Smith was the honorary chaplain to Queen Victoria and the Chaplain General of the British Army during World War I. John Smith used to ask all the candidates for the chaplaincy one question:

Now, I want you to show me how you would deal with a man. We will suppose I am a soldier who has been wounded on the field of battle. I have three minutes to live and I am afraid to die, because I do not know Christ. Tell me, how can I be saved and die with the assurance that all is well with my soul?

If the applicant began to beat around the bush and hem and haw and talk about the church and the ordinances and so on, John Taylor would say,

That will never do. I have only three minutes to live. Tell me what I must do.

As long as John Taylor Smith was Chaplain General, unless a candidate could answer that question, he could not become a chaplain in the Army.

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?!”

This is the greatest question in the world that anyone can ever ask. And the answer is the most important answer in all the world. It separates heaven and hell; it separates those who are saved and those who are lost; it divides those who will be allowed through the gates of the city of God and those who will be cast away.

The answer to, “What must I do to be saved?”

Look at Paul and Silas’ answer in verse 31.

They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

There was no lecture; no religious “mumbo jumbo”; nothing about how his parents raised him; no self-image test; no exhortation toward some sacrament or system of religion; no requirement of baptism or church membership, in fact, the church is not even mentioned! This man has three minutes to live!

May I suggest that this answer provides us with several wonderful things. Let me give them to you.

The simplest invitation – “Believe in!”

1. Paul and Silas’ answer to “What must I do to be saved?” provides the simplest invitation – “Believe in!”

“What must I do to be saved?”

“Do???” Paul and Silas reply in concert, “You don’t do anything but believe in the One who has done it all for you.”

Continue to verse 32.

And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house.

John Paton went as a pioneer missionary to the New Hebrides islands. He found that the natives among whom he began to work, had no way of writing their language. He began to learn the language and, in time, began to work on a translation of the Bible for them. Soon, he discovered that they had no word for “faith”. This was serious, of course, for a person can hardly translate the Bible without it.

One day, John went on a hunt with one of the natives. They shot a large deer in the course of the hunt, and after tying its legs together and supporting it on a pole, laboriously trekked back down the mountain path to Paton’s home near the seashore. As they reached the house, both men threw the deer down. Then, the native immediately flopped into one of the

deck chairs on the porch exclaiming, “My, it is good to stretch yourself out here and rest.”

Paton immediately jumped to his feet and recorded the phrase. In his final translation of the New Testament, this was the phrase used to convey the idea of saving faith, trust, or belief,

Stretch yourself out upon the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.

Now that is easier said than done. Why? Because there is no such thing as a free lunch! I do not know how many people have said to me over the years, after I have finished telling them the gospel and how they can be saved, “That’s so simple!”

That is the reason Paul reiterated in Romans, chapter 11, verse 6,

... if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

Other people have said, “That’s too demeaning . . . God’s just going to have to accept me the way I am. I’m not that bad.”

Oh no, my friend, you must say, “O Lord, I want you to accept me, even though there’s nothing about me that’s acceptable.”

Does that bother you?!

The only Savior – “Believe in the Lord Jesus!”

2. Now notice that the invitation is exclusive in its destination, “Believe in the Lord Jesus” – He is the only Savior!

The politically correct language of tolerance has opened the door to eastern religions. These are religions that are spiritually bankrupt and provide no escape other than through a series of reincarnations, hopefully into better and better life forms until you reach god-consciousness.

One such religion that is sweeping the country in interest is Buddhism. I have an article concerning this from a recent issue of *World Magazine*.

According to this magazine, two movies are being released and both of them are expected to do very well. One of them chronicles the life of the Dalai Lama and idealistically portrays Buddhism as the religion of compassion and tolerance. That is just perfect for an American audience.

You might say, “It’s only a movie.”

My friend, in a recent interview, the director of the movie said that each day’s shooting would end

with Tibetan monks praying over the set and crew and leading the cast in singing Buddhist songs.

The east is coming. We in the west are their mission field.

Today, according to this article, in southern California alone, a Buddhist temple is constructed every two months.ⁱ

Earlier in Acts, chapter 4, verse 12, we listened as Peter preached,

... there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.

The everlasting promise – “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved!”

3. Those who place their faith in that Savior, are given the everlasting promise – “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved!”

In our next discussion of the book of Acts, I want to spend an entire session to fully discuss the nature of salvation – the definition of salvation – and to discuss what it means to be saved.

The greatest legacy – “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household!”

4. Now notice the greatest legacy – “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household!”

Now a lot of people stop at the words, “you and your household” and come up with all sorts of covenant promises related to some sort of household salvation.

You just need to keep reading – look at verse 32 again,

And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house.

In other words, everyone in this man’s household heard the gospel that night. Verse 31 could be amplified to say, “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved – you and everyone else in your household who believes in the Lord Jesus.” So, his wife, if there was one, and his children, if there were some, heard the gospel. That is the greatest legacy for any household – for the man or woman in the home to make sure that everyone under the roof has heard the gospel.

Sir, do your children know where you stand with God? Do they hear you pray? Ma’am, do your children come to you with questions about the gospel, knowing that you have the answer? I want you to know that if I won 10,000 to Christ, it would never measure up to the legacy of my four children knowing Christ.

You have to understand, this jailer wants his household to hear, because verse 32 tells us he invites these prisoners into his home!

The Grace of God Through Sharing

The compassion of the jailer

The jailer also does something else. Look at verses 33 through 34.

And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

The character of the church

Now take a look at the church in Philippi. The congregation is growing down by the riverbank. There is the cultured, wealthy Lydia, a slave girl who has been recently delivered by the power of Christ, and now, the latest member, a crusty old jailer and his family. The jailer probably has not stopped smiling since the other night! And perhaps there are a few former felons that he has brought along with him.

Warren Wiersbe said,

The nucleus of that church was made up of a wealthy woman, a slave girl, and a Roman jailer; but such is the grace of God!

The church is now flying its flag on the continent of Europe. It is the flag of grace – what amazing grace – the amazing grace of God!

ⁱ World Magazine, (Sept. 20, 1997).