

Amazing Grace

Part II

Acts 16:35-40

Introduction

In our last discussion of the book of Acts, we observed the incredible event, at midnight, when a callused, hardened jailer asked the apostle Paul, “What must I do to be saved?”

Mankind is still asking that question today. It has not really changed. And there are a myriad of different answers. What is your answer?

Two important questions

I want to start our discussion today, by assigning a little homework. However, rather than do this after class, I want you to do it now at the beginning of class. I would love for everyone to do it, because I want you to know what you believe. There are two important questions and I want you to take a moment before I begin to answer both of them.

If you were to die tomorrow, do you believe you would go to heaven?

1. The first question is, “If you were to die tomorrow, do you believe you would go to heaven?”

You may choose an answer of, “Yes, absolutely,” or “Yes, I think so,” or “I’m not sure.”

For those who answered the question, “Yes, absolutely,” or “Yes, I think so,” the second question will tell you why you had that kind of assurance. For those who answered, “I’m not sure,” the second question will let you know what you believe in your heart it takes to be sure.

If you died and appeared at the gate of heaven where God asked why He should let you into heaven, what would you say?

2. The second question is, “If you died and appeared at the gate of heaven where God asked why He should let you into heaven, what would you say?”

In other words, what would you think God would require you to say? What do you think the answer is that He would be waiting for, that would open the door of heaven? Answer that, would you?

Review of Romans 16:25-34

Now that you have answered those questions, let us go back to the midnight scene where the jailer asked the apostle Paul the most important question in the world. Let us pick up our story in Acts, chapter 16, with verses 25 through 34.

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

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.

When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.

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?”

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

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

And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household.

(His household because . . .),

And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

Now, after our last discussion, I felt compelled to delve a little more into the meaning of the word “believe”. I am doing so because I firmly believe that there are people in this audience, as well as in our society, that have been given an answer that is not biblical. There seems to be a lot of confusion about something that God wanted to be so clear.

So, I want to just put the brakes on, as we go through the book of Acts, dive into this word “believe,” and come up with the answer that can be substantiated by the God’s Word. Then, you can answer, “Yes, absolutely,” and give a biblical answer as to why.

The Stability of the Church in Philippi

Now, because we are going through the book of Acts, I want to briefly address the last paragraph of chapter 16. Let me make a couple of comments and then we will go on. Look at verses 35 through 37a.

Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, “Release those men.”

And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, “The chief magistrates have sent to release you. Therefore come out now and go in peace.”

But Paul said to them, “They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly?” . . .

The word “secretly,” by the way, is a key word that you should underline, because it explains why Paul does what he does. Continue to verse 37b, where Paul says,

“No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out.”

In other words, “Let the magistrates come and escort us out of prison.”

Continue to verses 38 through 40.

The policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that they were Romans,

and they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging them to leave the city.

They went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.

Paul, in these verses, forced the hand of the magistrates to publicly acknowledge the innocence of Paul and Silas. In fact, the magistrates had to publicly acknowledge that *they* had broken the law, not Paul and Silas.

The magistrates had been the lawbreakers. Why? Because they had beaten Roman citizens and that was against Roman law. This was Philippi, which was a Roman colony, and therefore they had to adhere to Roman law. And, if distant Rome should hear that they had beaten Roman citizens, the wrath of Rome would be aroused, and these magistrates knew that their position and tenure would be a little shaky.

So, the magistrates came. Now Paul appealed to that simply because he did not want to leave at night, he wanted to leave in broad daylight. In fact, he did not want to leave the church in an unstable position. He did not want them answering questions such as, “Hey, I heard that your founder was put in jail, and then there was some kind of earthquake and he escaped. Is that right? He’s a criminal, isn’t he?”

Paul did not want to leave under those conditions, so he stays long enough that the magistrates escort him out in broad daylight and admit to the public that they themselves had broken the law. This put the church in good standing. In fact, I cannot help but imagine that the magistrates would have been a little extra cautious to mess around with the church again after that.

Before we leave this scene, let us look again at what an interesting church this Philippi church was now. As the flag of the church is unfurled on European soil, there is Lydia, a cultured, refined, wealthy woman, a slave girl, who was the voice of the python who predicted the future under the power of demonic forces and adhered to the temple of Apollo, and then, the prison warden and his family. They are all celebrating the risen Lord together. What a

manifestation of God's grace! That is what church is supposed to be all about.

The Salvation of Citizens in Philippi

Now, if you go back to verse 30, you discover the warden asking the question,

... what must I do to be saved?

A study of the key word "believe"

Paul responds, in verse 31,

... Believe in the Lord Jesus . . .

"Believe" defined

The word "believe" could be defined, "to place your trust in the cross work of Christ as sufficient for salvation." In other words, it is not Jesus plus; it is not the cross plus; it is not anything plus – it is Christ alone.

Paul says, in verse 31,

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

Paul says, in effect, "By believing, you *will* be saved." He did not say, "hope so," or "think so," or "Give it your best shot," or "You'll get to the gate and can say, 'Please, I wanted to get in.'" He says, ". . . you *will* be saved . . .".

There is nothing more important than that you know that, so that you can answer the first question with, "Yes, absolutely. I know!"

And this is the reason why. Some time ago, I was driving behind a car that had a personalized license plate. I always like reading those and trying to figure them out, don't you?! This one was easy, "I INSURE U". There was no question what that guy did. There was no question what that guy was passionate about. In fact, I would bet that you could not have lunch with him without him wanting to do an immediate comparison. Right?

Everyone attests to the value of insurance. Do you have your home insured? Do you have your car insured? Is your expensive truck insured? Do you have your life insured, so that should you die at forty, or fifty, or sixty, or seventy, or eighty, or whatever, there can be provision for your family when you are gone? What about for the next eighty billion years?

I found it interesting to read the story of Joseph Knapp, who is the founder of Metropolitan Life Insurance, and wealthy beyond words. His wife was a believer, who was so caught up with the truth of insurance beyond the grave that it was she who wrote the music for a poem that her dear friend, Fanny Crosby, wrote. The poem says, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine". How can you have that kind of assurance? What does it mean to believe?

Well, the word "believe," and we are going to look at several passages of scripture, appears more often in the gospel of John than any other book. So, look in the book of John at chapter 3, where the word "believe" appears seven times in just nine verses! John was passionate that you would know that you had this eternal assurance. In fact, in John, chapter 20, verse 31a, John informs the reader that he has written these things,

... that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ . . .

There is the word "believe" again. In other words, "God has inspired me to give you assurance that you are on the way to heaven."

In I John, chapter 5, verse 13, the same author, in his first epistle, writes,

These things I have written to you who believe . . . that you may KNOW that you have eternal life.

Do you get the idea that, if you got around John for five minutes, he would be asking you about your divine, eternal insurance?

And, it is no different in chapter 3 of John. Let us take a closer look at what he is saying there. Jesus Christ, in this chapter, is being visited by Nicodemus, who wants to know how to inherit eternal life. Perhaps you know this story. We studied it together, several years ago. It was to Nicodemus that Jesus Christ uttered the incredible words that most of us have probably memorized, even as young children. Say it to yourself with me, verse 16,

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

"Believe" illustrated

Now Jesus said a lot of things to Nicodemus in chapter 3. I want to give you three statements.

Your first birth was into the wrong family

1. The first statement is that you and I were born into the wrong family.

Jesus is going to tell that to Nicodemus. You too, like Nicodemus, were born into the wrong family.

You might ask, “Are you talking about my mother and father?”

Not really. Paul amplifies this in the book of Romans, when he says, in chapter 5, verse 12,

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because ALL sinned

Paul is telling us, in this verse, that we were born into the human family – and that is the wrong family to be born into if you ever hope to have eternal life. That is because our father, Adam, was a criminal, and he was given the sentence of death.

You might say, “But that sentence isn’t mine.”

Oh? You will prove it by dying one day, and so will I. We are all condemned because of sin. The sentence is the same as that which was delivered to Adam and Eve when they were told not to eat the fruit. If they ate the fruit, they would surely what? Die. Was God telling the truth? Yes. How do you know? They died. How do you know that you are related to the sentence of Adam, not only the nature of Adam, but the sentence of Adam? You will die and I will die. That is part of the bad news.

Look, in fact, at what Jesus says and John records, in chapter 3, verse 17,

For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

You might say, “Stephen, that verse says, Jesus did not come into the world to judge the world, so why are you being so judgmental?”

The word “send” is the word “apostello,” which gives us our word “apostle”. That means, He is sent with a mission; He was given a message to deliver and the message was not a message of judgement. Why? Continue to verse 18a.

He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged . . .

(When?),

. . . already . . .

In other words, Jesus did not bring a message of judgement into the world, because the world was already under judgement. Why condemn an already condemned human race? The world needs a Savior.

When Jesus was born, His birth was announced to the outcasts of society – those religiously unclean men, the shepherds. The news was given first to them, as recorded in Luke, chapter 2, verse 11a,

for today in the city of David there has been born for you a . . .

(What? A judge? A teacher? A healer? A philosopher? A moralist? A founder of a new religion?),

. . . Savior . . .

The world is perishing. Every member of the human race will die, unless the rapture occurs while we are living. We will accomplish, in our bodies, the sentence of our father, Adam. We need a Savior.

Now, look back at verse 3b of John, chapter 3, where Jesus tells Nicodemus,

. . . unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Why? Because the first birth placed you into the wrong family. So you have to be born again to be birthed into a new family; this time into the right family. That is what Jesus is telling Nicodemus, and that leads me to the second statement.

Something must take place that rebirths you into the right family

2. The second statement is that something must take place that rebirths you into the right family.

Notice John, chapter 3, verse 5.

Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”

Now that helps, but it also confuses. What does it mean by “of water”?

The commentaries and religious publications have a half dozen answers to that question. Some of them are that it is a reference to the cleansing aspect of the New Covenant; it is a reference to the cleansing of the Word; it is a synonymous reference to the Holy Spirit, so Jesus is talking about the same thing; it is a reference to John the Baptist and his baptism of

repentance; it is a reference to the necessity of water baptism for salvation.

Let me refer briefly to that last view. Jesus was not teaching that the new birth comes through water baptism. In fact, New Testament water baptism is related to death, not birth; to burial, not being born.

Jesus is talking, in this verse, about being born again. In other words, in order to get into the kingdom, you have to be born out of this family into a new family. And He gives His commentary, by the way, on what that first and second birth are in verse 6. Sometimes, if you just keep reading the Bible, it commentates on itself. Look at verse 6a,

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, . . .

You could circle the word “flesh,” draw a line up to the word “water” in verse 5, and there you have the explanation – that is the natural first birth. Continue to verse 6b.

. . . and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

That is the supernatural second birth.

So, in Jesus’ analogy, in these verses, the fleshly, or natural birth corresponds to being born of water.

The Greek words “of water” are “ek hudatos,” which could literally be translated “out of water”. In fact, it is interesting that the Hebrew verb for “to give birth” actually could be translated in respect to the rupturing of the membranes, or the water sac.

This past Friday, my family and I celebrated the birthday of our four-year-old Charity – our last child. I can remember being in the labor and delivery room of this child, and I will not bore you with all the details, but I remember when the doctor came in and broke my wife’s what? Her water.

Now, the doctors explained to me what it meant to break the water, but they were not as clear as I wanted them to be. It meant to let the water out of the swimming pool. Okay? And nobody wants to swim in a pool without water. That is the incentive for the baby to be born. Now isn’t that clearer than what the doctors told you?

It worked, because here came that little swimmer, who no longer had water to swim in. So, this is the incentive. And in fact, the contractions really began to pick up in speed and intensity and all of that. Thankfully, Marsha, my wife, did not say anything to me or about me that would jeopardize my ministry as your pastor, so I’ll report that to you!

Our little girl was born “ek hudatos,” or “out of water”. Verse 5 is referring to that. In other words, “You must be born . . .” – physically, “ek hudatos” – “. . . out of water.”

That is too obvious. Everyone knows that in order to go to heaven, you have to be born. Well, you are thinking like a good Jew. The Jews said, “All I have to do is be born into the family of Abraham and I’m in.”

Jesus says, “Okay, you have to be born, that’s true. But, that first birth is not enough, even for the Jew. You have to be born again into the family of God.”

The world’s counterfeits

It has always fascinated me to read and study of other religious systems that have sought to answer the question of how to be born again; how to be saved. And, it is interesting to me that there are kernels of truth, surrounded by a lot of religious jargon and a lot of other stuff, that eventually, do not lead people to heaven, but unfortunately, lead people to hell.

Buddhism

I mentioned Buddhism in our last discussion, which is becoming the religion of the elite. There are now movies about Buddhism and people are quoting Buddha. It is supposedly the compassionate religion of tolerance, which is just perfect for our society today. Buddhism has also addressed the issue of rebirth – it just has many of them and call it reincarnation.

Mystery religions

The Greeks, who lived before the time of Christ, created religions called the mystery religions. They seemed so close to the truth that would be revealed in Christ, and yet, so far away. It is obvious the way Satan was counterfeiting the truth, even before Christ came.

The mystery religions were built around the idea of rebirth. In fact, an initiate into a mystery religion was called a twice-born individual. In the Phrygian mystery religion, an initiate, who had gone through all of the induction and completed the initiation, would be given a cup of milk to drink, to signify that he was, “a newborn baby”.

A fellow by the name of Apuleius, a Greek, went through the initiation of one mystery religion and later, wrote in a manuscript that we still have extant. He writes that he underwent a voluntary death and therefore, he obtained his spiritual birthday and was reborn.

One of the most fascinating mystery religious ceremonies was the Taurobolium. In this ceremony, a candidate would be taken into a deep pit and then, the top of the pit would be covered with strong latticework. A bull would be slain and laid on top of the latticework, and the blood from the bull would drip into the pit. The initiate would literally, be bathed in the blood of a dying bull. He would emerge from that pit and be considered, “reborn for all eternity”.

Now, who do you think is behind all of that deception?

Eastern Orthodox church

In current times, religion has done nothing more than confuse by adding, adding, adding, adding to the simple words of Christ. Someone handed a newspaper to me last week, published by the Greek Orthodox church, which is the east’s version of the west’s Roman Catholicism. Roman Catholicism follows the Pope as their leader. The east believes that Rome should have moved to Constantinople as the new city of God. They have their own religious system and their own patriarch, who is called the Ecumenical All-holiness Patriarch, who also fulfills what the Pope does in the west. It is basically the same religious system.

I found it fascinating that in this newspaper, there was an entire article answering the question, “Tell me, Father, what is the right way to salvation?” I read the whole thing, so let me give their answer. It is the beneficial extrication of man from sin and its consequences, which is the eternal removal from the fellowship of God. This is achieved by true belief in Jesus, the Savior. So far, so good. *And*, the completion of good deeds. Uh-oh, religion just got in the way.

The question being asked is, “How can we be saved?” Let me give an abbreviated version of their answer.

First, we must profoundly believe. Then, through the mystery of holy baptism, we enter into the time and space of the kingdom of

heaven. Then the Sacrament of Chrismation endows the newly illuminated with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Then holy confession cleanses, relieves, and assists the sinner. Then holy communion, the great gift of God to man, unites us with Him and gives to us the provision for eternal life. Then the mystery of holy umption grants us salvation of body and soul.

Which one is it? It is all of them. Let me continue.

The correct faith, the works, and the grace of the sacraments of the church, lead us forward spiritually and perfect man and lead him to salvation.

In other words, it is a process. And, you must hang on until your last breath, because you might not be in if you mess up along the way.

As the holy fathers say, “Those who love God here, and show it and prove their love by manner, word, and deed, will continue to love Him and enjoy being near Him.”

So, if you are good enough, you get to be by Him. Follow this, as it continues.

Our lifestyle therefore, on earth, plays an important part in our salvation. We should not depend exclusively on a merciful God.

I do – totally. Because if it were not for the mercy and grace of God, every waking moment I would have violated the holiness of God and I would be condemned to hell. Something has to happen. Jesus calls it a new birth.

Ecumenical Jihad

If you really want to muddy the waters, I just finished reading a book entitled, *Ecumenical Jihad*. I know it does not sound like good bathtub reading, but there is startling stuff in this book. The author, Peter Kreeft, is a fellow who is gaining prominence and unfortunately, is being endorsed by some who have been leaders and are still considered leaders in the evangelical church. This fellow is a theologian who is an apologist. He writes, basically, that we should all get together for the sake of winning back western civilization to morality. However, this book takes it a step further.

This book is Kreeft’s recent release and he writes of an out-of-body experience that he has had. Though

he is a great professor at Boston College, he succumbs to subjective experience. He talks about his out-of-body experience, in which he supposedly goes to where he believes may be heaven. When he arrives, the first person he meets is Buddha. They have a conversation that goes along the lines of Buddha saying, "Well, I was pursuing truth. It was not along the lines of biblical truth and I didn't arrive at the atoning work of Christ, but I was pursuing truth and God understood and I'm here." He goes a little further along the line and meets Confucius. He goes a little further along the line and meets Mohammed. Basically, he meets them all. The message is that we are all brothers, if we indeed pursue truth.

I heard John MacArthur talk about this book when he spoke at a conference that I attended. He said what I am about to say, but I just could not believe it, so I bought the book. On the back, among others, there is an endorsement by a man named J. I. Packer. He says, among other things, "What if he is right?"

If he, Peter Kreeft, is right, if the mystery religions are right, if Buddhism is right, if the Orthodox church and its works are right, then Jesus Christ is a liar. Because, Jesus made the exclusive claim that there are not many roads to God, there is only one. In fact, He said, "I am it." The incarnate God said, as recorded in John, chapter 14, verse 6,

*. . . I am the way, and the truth, and the life;
NO ONE comes to the Father BUT
THROUGH ME.*

That is the offensive nature of Christianity, ladies and gentlemen. If Jesus Christ is right, then everyone else is wrong. If He is the way, then everything else is not the way. If this is the gospel, than anything else is not the gospel. If this tells you how to get to heaven, then anything else is the way to hell. Right?

Frankly we would never treat any other truth or science like we seem to treat spiritual truth. As I mentioned in our last discussion, I *never* thought of going up to my math teacher and saying, "Look, could you give me credit for getting close?"

Let me make one more statement.

Salvation is not a process or a combination of good works and faith, but a transaction that takes place once for all between you and the Savior

Salvation is not a process or a combination of good works and faith, but a transaction that takes

place once for all between you and the Savior. How do you make that transaction? We could spend so much time on this, but let me try to be as clear and brief as I can at the same time.

Look at verses 14 and 15 of John, chapter 3. Jesus gives an illustration to us, which is wonderful, because we can kind of hang our hats on stories, can't we?

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

Something happened in the Old Testament, where the Israelites were rescued from certain death. Jesus says, "That was an illustration of Me."

Illustration of Numbers 21:5-9

Now, let us go back to Numbers, chapter 21. Look at verses 5 through 9.

The people spoke against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food."

The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.

So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord and you; intercede with the Lord, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard [pole]; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he shall live."

And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.

Why not develop some medicine? Why not give them the formula for an antidote? Why not tell the Israelites to work a little bit? They deserved it, because of the way they bellyached. Why not give them something to do, which would satisfy the natural instinct of men and women everywhere, to work on behalf of their own cure?

There is something natural about wanting to help God provide the solution. However, we are, in fact, told that they were not told to make an antidote for the snake bite. That is indicative of the greater fact that there is no human remedy for sin; there is no remedy that we can create, such as religion or works. And religion and human nature have a hard time admitting that, right?

Donald Grey Barnhouse writes some interesting words about this passage. He said,

In the religious fashion of our day, had the serpents come, there would have been a rush to incorporate the "Society For the Extermination of the Fiery Serpents". There would have been badges for the coat lapel, cards for district workers, secretaries for organizational branches, pledge cards, and mass rallies. There would have been a publication office and a weekly journal to tell of the progress of the work. There would have been photographs of heaps of serpents that had been killed by the faithful workers. All of them feverishly trying, by human effort, to overcome the serpent's bite of sin.

Let us accompany one of the zealous workers, as he might take a pledge card into the tent of a bitten man. The man had been bitten and the poison had already affected his limbs. He lies in feverish agony, the glaze of death already coming to his eyes. The zealous member of the "Society For the Extermination of the Fiery Serpents" tells him of all that has been done to combat the serpents and urges the man to join the society. The dying victim fumbles in his pocketbook for money and then takes a pen in his hand, his fingers are held by the worker, who helps him form his signature on the pledge and membership card. The man signs in full and then dies.

That is a classic illustration of religion, ladies and gentlemen. My friend, you can join a society, you can join a church, you can go through Bible lessons or catechisms, you can give money, you can get baptized when you are young, middle-aged, or old, and yet, die without God.

You and I have been bitten by sin and it is a mortal wound. Is there hope? Yes.

Look up at a wooden pole and see, dying there, paying the penalty for all your sin, Jesus Christ. Shed

any self-sufficiency or ambition or good things about you, and look to Him, alone. And, in that look, when you discover, maybe even today, that you cannot work your way to His acceptance, you cannot be good enough, you cannot join anything, but you are stricken with this thing called sin, you must give yourself to Him. He offers you eternal life freely. At that moment, ladies and gentlemen, once for all, you experience, personally, the amazing grace of God. You are born again.