Sunday September 5, 1976

Book 6

"WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?" Acts 16:25-34

A man had a frightening experience and as a result asked, "What must I do to be saved." He received a surprising answer. Here's what happened.

The Apostle Paul and his partner Silas, had been put in jail in the city of Philippi, because they had healed a slave girl who was a fortune teller. Now that she was healed, she was of no use to her owners. The owners, in anger, caused a mob to attack Paul and Silas, brought charges against them and had them thrown into jail. They were put in maximum security and had their feet fastened in chains.

Undaunted by their beating and being in prison, Paul and Silas spent the evening singing hymns and praying while the other prisoners listened to them.

About midnight there was an earthquake, so powerful that the foundations of the prison were shaken and all the doors were torn loose and the chains which bound the prisoners including Paul and Silas, were loosened. The prisoners were free to go.

When the jailer saw what had happened as a result of the earthquake, he was a thoroughly distressed man. Even though earthquakes were decidely more frequent in that part of the world than they are in our Western world, nevertheless one did not take them as a matter of course, nor did one ever become accustomed to them.

The jailer was so scared, not only because of the earthquake, but also because he was sure that all the prisoners had escaped, that he was ready to kill himself with his own sword. But Paul shouted to him, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!"

Finding it hard to believe, the jailer called for lights, rushed into the prison cells, and then fell down with fear and trembling before Paul and Silas and asked, "What must I do to be saved?"

The question has a haunting ring to it. People like the Philippian jailer are still asking, "What must I do to be saved?"

A man plays fast and loose with the moral scheme of things, forgetting that for everything there is a price to be paid--and when the accounts come in and he sees a part of himself that he did not know was there, he cries out--"What must I do to be saved?"

A father spends 99% of his creative energy and nearly every waking hour trying to make "good" in his business life or profession and one day it dawns on him that while he has been making good in his career, he has been failing tragically with his family, and in that awful moment of truth, he asks, "What must I do to be saved?"

It's a question for all of us. Like that frightened little jailer in the town of Philippi, we may not see it as a religious question at all. But it was a question of life and death for him. The prisoners under his charge were able to escape and under Roman law that meant the death penalty for the jailer. So when he asked, "What must I do to be saved," he wasn't asking a theoritical question, he was asking "What must I do to escape the consequences of my failure?"

It is in such a state of insecurity that we human beings begin to think about the basic realities of life--when our world around us literally falls apart, then like the jailer we ask, "What must I do to be saved?"

So whether we know it or not, when we ask that question in whatever circumstance, we are asking a deeply religious question as well as a practical question. We are asking--"What must I do to have my life made whole again?" "What must I do to get back on the right track?"

The answer which Paul gave to the jailer was a surprising one and yet simple and straightforward--"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you and your household and you will be saved." This was much more than just an answer to the jailer's surface question. Paul was talking about being saved in a much deeper sense, here and now and forever, than the jailer realized.

In the New Testament, the word for being saved, "salvation" means health, wholeness, being in harmony with those around you, with the world and with God. It means letting God be a part of your life. It means opening yourself to the love and goodness of God.

It means to know that God accepts us as we are, where we are and then because we accept the fact that God accepts us, God changes us, heals us. God's power begins to work within us.

Being saved, salvation, is something that happens here and now. Too often in the past some Christians have interpreted being saved in too narrow a way--of gaining life after death, or of being saved from some individual sin. It includes that, but also includes much more.

Being saved, means saying to God, "Here I am. I accept and believe the fact that you accept and love me just as I am. I don't have to wait until my life is completely straightened out before I can experience your love and power. Rather when my life is most shaken up, then may be the time when I am most open to accepting your power in my life.

Salvation then, is the personal experience of God's loving acceptance of us just as we are. It is the experience of knowing that God is for us and not against us and therefore the world, the universe is not a hostile place. So when Paul said to the jailer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you and your household, and you will be saved," he was saying all ofthis. He was saying--accept the fact that God accepts you.

This means further that to be saved is to be free--no longer a slave to your desires, to material things, to your guilt, to your past failures, to your worries. If God loves you and accepts you, how can these things be any threat to you? Salvation means freedom, freedom to be what God intends us to be--and then of course when we die, we enter into an even higher degree of freedom.

If then, this is salvation, if this is what being saved means, "What must I do to be saved?" "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." But how does it happen? When does it happen?

1. Note first, that most of us do not even ask the question, "What must I do to be saved," until an earthquake hits our lives. Our world has to be shaken. We may experience an emptiness in our lives, or our world falls apart in some other way. That is the teachable moment. It's like the alcoholic who first has to hit bottom before he is ready

to admit that he has a problem and needs help. Sometimes those around us can help force the issue. Maybe his wife threatens to leave him or does, or maybe he gets fired from his job. It takes that for some to ask, "What must I do to be saved?"

In his book, BORN AGAIN, Charles Colson tells how the whole Watergate mess helped him realize how deeply in need he was. Up until that point, he wasn't aware that he needed to be saved from anything or for something. Only when his world fell apart was he ready to admit that his life had become unmanageable and that only a power greater than himself could restore him. It was at this point, with the help of others, that he made a decision to turn his will and life over to God.

Recently, John Ehrlichman in a statement implied that he too was asking the question--what must I do to be saved, even though he didn't use those words. He said, "I'm more and more realizing that I lived 50 years of my life without ever coming to grips with the very basic question of what is and is not important to me, what is and is not right and wrong, what is and is not valuable and worth-while." It was only because of an earthquake in his life that he began to ask such questions.

Incidentally, some of us eager Christians, unlike St. Paul, want to give the answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved," before it is asked. And when we give an answer to a question that has not yet been asked, the answer is meaningless. Often we have to wait for the teachable moment. If you ever wonder why nobody is listening to you--it may be because you are giving answers to questions which are not being asked.

2. Note secondly, that once we or someone has asked the question in whatever words they use--"What must I do to be saved," the next step is to make a commitment. It can be as simple as, "Here God, take my life just as it is and use it." Or, "I accept Jesus Christ into my life," or "God, I accept your acceptance of me and I'm going to open my life to your Spirit." Or as the alcoholic says in A.A. "Made a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of God." This is the crucial step--to admit we need help and accept it. This is the leap of faith.

3. Thirdly, a persons needs to join the Christian Church, for no person can be truly saved apart from the community in which he or she lives his or her life. Just as the Philippian jailer needed Paul and Silas and the Christian community, so do we also. Allowing God's Spirit to take over one's life is always much more than a private affair.

Being a Christian involves people working together in relationships both private and public. It involves loving and caring and teaching one another. It was often said of the early church, "See how they love one another." Their salvation was evident in their lives to outsiders.

In the case of Paul and Silas and the jailer, note that after Paul told the man that he needed to believe in Jesus Christ--he also did more. The book of Acts says--"And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house." Immediately, Paul began to teach the jailer and his family about the Christian faith.

The Apostle Paul knew that the person who would be saved needs to learn the fundamental principles which underlie Christian faith and behavior.

So part of being saved is becoming a part of a Christian community and learning from it and growing in it. Again, in his book BORN AGAIN, Charles Colson mentions over and over, how important being a part of a Christian community is to him. We all need people to call us back to our commitment, to remind us when we are off the track, to support us and pray for us.

4. In the fourth place then, to be saved and to remain saved, is like remaining healthy in a physical sense. We can get our body all in shape, eat the right foods, be strong and healthy, but if we do not continue to follow good health practices, our good health will fade quickly. Similarly, as Christians, we need regular spiritual exercises. This means regularity in worship, prayer and the strengthening of one's spiritual life.

A Christian lives in two worlds at once, the material physical world of bread and butter and the spiritual world of live and loyalty and of being connected to God and one another. To continue to live in this spiritual side of life, we need to develop those faculties by which we can be in communication with the things that are unseen.

Jesus knew the importance of this. This is why he taught his disciples to pray and why he had a regular discipline of prayer, worship and devotion as part of his life.

All of this is essential to our growing and maturing as Christians. We often like to talk of being "born again," but then mistakenly think we can stop there. Think of what would happen in a physical sense if we were just born and then stopped growing or learning. We wouldn't learn how to walk, or talk, or think, or make decisions. Who would want to stay in the baby stage all of life? We are to grow in wisdom and stature. But some people think they can be born again spiritually, and then stop right there. And they remain spiritual babies all through their lives. Their faith does not grow and mature and they often become narrow, self-righteous people. To grow and mature is to be saved over and over again.

All of us need the SOMETHING MORE in our life which the Philippian jailer was looking for. We need the knowledge that a Power is there behind it all giving life a cohesiveness and a direction that makes sense; a saving knowledge that God loves and accepts us as we are and wants us to have a life that will be filled with joy and richness beyond our imagining. That's all a part of being saved.

What must I do to be saved? Put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. That's not an exhortation to try harder. Paul and Silas did not say to the jailer--"first quit your job, then start living by the 10 commandments and accept the doctrine of the virgin birth and the trinity. All they really said was--"open your life to God's love."

You can do it here and now. And no matter how many times you've done it before, it needs to be done again and again. Do it this morning. In this service of worship--turn your life over to God and then continue to grow and mature as a Christian. Amen.