

THE GOSPEL AT MIDNIGHT

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It was “at midnight” in a city called Philippi, in a jail. Two servants of God, of whom He had once said, “Touch not My anointed ones, and do My prophets no harm” (Psalm 105:15), had been rudely thrust into a prison cell by the city fathers who did not understand the message of God’s grace. Paul and Silas were proclaiming that good news. You might wonder why the Lord even permitted them to be locked up with chains when He has said “Don’t touch them!” The reason: He wanted His servants to win the hearts of the jailer and his family and this was the only way to get through to them (learn the lesson: what you think are calamities, by God’s grace become avenues of special blessing!).

The jailer has heard Paul’s preaching which stirred the anger of the city fathers who threw Paul and Silas into prison. The jailer could have heard Paul’s message and been convicted of truth but stubbornly hardened his heart; he did exercise some vigor in “fastening their feet in the stocks” (it took an earthquake that night to deliver him from his prejudice).

A severe earthquake (common in that land) had shaken the prison walls, sprung the doors wide open, and loosed the chains. In setting His two servants free God also set all the prisoners free. The jailer thought he would have to pay with his life next morning for the prisoners being freed, for what

God had done for his prisoners; so he decided to kill himself.

Paul said, no; the gospel hymns that he and Silas had been singing had solemnized the prisoners and now they were ready voluntarily to stay in prison until their cases could be decided, so, don’t kill yourself, says Paul (all this is in Acts 16:22-28).

It was pitch dark, of course. In the confusion, the jailer had someone bring in a torch, and “trembling,” asked the apostles, “What must I do to be saved?”

The apostles had sung midnight hymns, the psalms of David, in duet (maybe in rich baritone and tenor). The hard heart was melted; then came the earthquake, and the question, “What shall I do to be saved?” It’s Paul answer that troubles many: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” Was that simplistic and maybe unbalanced? Shouldn’t the man be told to keep all the commandments and do good works?

Yes, he should do them; but it’s not that he *has* to do all these things on pain of God’s rejection; *he will do them* through a heart appreciation of who “the Lord Jesus Christ” is! He has heard Paul declare that what “avails” is “faith working through love [*agape*]” (Gal. 5:6). Such faith works! It’s a verb, not a noun.

One of the psalms that the apostles sang in duet may have been #22—it probes the depths of Christ’s love in giving Himself for us eternally; the jailer was overcome with. . . . what can we call it? faith: a heart appreciation of the “width and length and depth and height [of]. . . . the love of Christ which passes knowledge” (Eph. 3:18, 19). It’s not

being motivated by terror toiling to do everything just right; it's faith "constraining" one to join Christ on His cross in self "crucified with Him" (Gal. 2:20).

Then there's no end to the good works the jailer will be motivated to do—forever.

Now here's the critical point. The two did not mislead the poor man: they told him the truth, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household" (vs. 31).

Another little point, if papa is truly converted, he will win his family! As Father's Day approaches, we think of the duties and the privileges of being a father. It will soon be Father's Day. What can you do for him? Get him a new tie, or new shirt, or some play toy that men like? Yes, of course. A nice card, words of appreciation? He would like that. But with all the excitement that Mother's Day brought a month earlier and the round of graduation ceremonies, there is usually not much energy left for Father's Day celebrations.

But fathers are the family entity most in need of help today. In most single parent families something has happened to father; he's gone. And in many prosperous two-parent families, father is so stressed out trying to keep the family economically on top that he has little if any spiritual or emotional energy left for being a father to the children (let alone, a husband to his wife). Millions of children don't "know" their father. He's too "busy." Few if any boys are taught in school how to be fathers. And it seems that biologically speaking human fathers don't have much of a DNA bank that equips them for the spiritual challenges that fatherhood implies.

In the animal kingdom, often "father" does his procreation bit and then he's off; could it be that humans, instead of evolving out of animal life are descending toward it? Ask the welfare specialists, the divorce lawyers. But where there's a need, there is a Savior.

The very last verse of the monumental Old Testament contains a divine promise of special blessings for fathers: "I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord [this is 'present truth']: and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children . . ." (Mal. 4:5, 6). Something foreign to DNA! A miraculous intervention.

But who is "Elijah"? Some white-haired old man in a robe? Jesus made plain that the answer is No, "he" is a message. The message of John the Baptist was the initial fulfillment of the prophecy (see Mt. 11:7-14). Therefore the final fulfillment will also be a message; a message that grips the heart, that heals old wounds, that reconciles alienated hearts to God and to one another.

Better than some new toy for Dad will be an understanding, mature, sympathetic prayer on your part, and a realization that you can be a human agent for "Elijah" to do his work. And if you don't have a Dad to pray for in that way, there are plenty of them all around you who need that "message."

In order to realize the blessings of fatherhood, we need a Savior who reveals to us the character of our heavenly Father. To "see" Him is to be transformed into His likeness. To be such a father means to learn to love as the heavenly Father

loves. The very essence of being such a father is to love one's children as Christ reveals how the heavenly Father loves us. We read that He "gave Himself for our sins" (Gal. 1:4). Such love means self-denial built-in to the character; father always senses the motivation to deny himself for the good of his family. It's never what-can-I-get-for-myself but always what-can-I-do-, or give, for them. The SUV's and boats and electronic toys take second place, as well as the time to be spent playing with them; the physical and spiritual needs of the family take precedence.

The Hornbill is a male bird which shuts his mate up in a hole in a tree, and patiently, faithfully ministers to her and the young until they can fly on their own. Day after day he is out seeking insects and other food which he dutifully carries to her in her imprisonment.

It's a beautiful little glimpse of "marital" fidelity which apparently is communicated through natural means. But for us, paternal fidelity is communicated through the Savior's ministry for our self-centered human hearts. He changes men who are naturally worldly, self-centered, into unselfish, faithful husbands and fathers. In this way we "may be the children of [our] Father which is in heaven," exhibiting the divine-family trait of a love which is *agape*.

This explains that mystery of being "perfect." Jesus says, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Mt. 5:44-48). You don't "do" this great change; you let Him do it, responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

God does not tease someone who sincerely asks, "What must I do to be saved?" When Paul and Silas answered the jailer in Philippi, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ," they were not giving an unbalanced and thus deceptive answer. But was mental "believing" all the man had to do? If you want to be saved, is your part simply, raise your hand in the evangelist's meeting, walk down the aisle, get baptized, and presto, you're eternally saved? What does it mean to "believe"?

In fact, they were quoting what Jesus Himself had told Nicodemus: "The Son of man [must] be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:14). Believe what?

He answers that question two verses later: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish. . . ." (a) Believe that God is a Father. (b) Believe that He loves the world with a love that is *agape*. (c) Believe that His love embraces a sinful world. (d) Believe that His giving was complete—it was not lending. It was not just for time; the giving was for eternity.

Mr. Jailer, you ask "What must I do. . . . ?" You must believe that God is your Father in heaven and that He loves you personally, and has adopted you as His child "in Christ."

Too complicated? The Bible explains this simply. The Son "emptied Himself," like pouring out the last drop of a bottle (Phil. 2:7; Isa. 53:12), which means that this love known as *agape* drove Him as far as hell in His search for us as the Good Shepherd (Luke 15:4-7). He died the same death that we

would have had to die if He had not come and died it for us! (You can think and think about that for a long time!)

“But,” says the Jailer, “aren’t you leaving out the real answer to my question: the works that I must do?”

What can one do when he/she has discovered the enormity of the sin which is in the heart? When you feel deeply guilty, polluted, alienated from the sunshine of God’s favor? When finally the blinders have been torn off your eyes and you discern your nakedness of soul? The pain is intense!

First, be thankful that at last you have come to see it, for this is possible only if you have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. His first work is to “convict of sin” (John 16:8). If He left you happy and content to go on in your sin, then you would have a reason to be worried (but that’s when we humans are not concerned!). “Blessed are they that mourn” because of the realization of deep sin (Matt. 5:4). If you have a lethal, undetected cancer and are blissfully unconcerned, you are not “blessed.” You can be happy when you realize the truth and can seek healing before it’s too late.

The question “What shall I *do* about my sin” comes short of the truth. The proper question is, “What shall I *believe*?” Yes, you can find examples in the Bible of people who have asked, “What must I *do* to be saved?” (Acts 16:30), but superficial reading has encouraged many dear people to lean upon a program of salvation by works, *doing* something. Please note that this jailer in Philippi was not an inspired man; but Paul was inspired when he

answered him, “*Believe* on the Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 31). Salvation lies not in *doing* this or that good thing but in *believing* truth. And then the believing “works” (Gal. 5:6).

Now, what do you believe? (a) That the Son of God has become your Savior, (b) that He has died the death that your sin deserves, (c) that it is He who in love has convicted you of the deep sinfulness of sin, (d) that He has experienced the hell that you would experience were it not for His sacrifice, (e) that He is now working as High Priest night and day, 24 hours a day, to save you from sin, (f) that the Father has “accepted” you “in Him” (Matt. 3:17; Eph. 1:6)?

And then? Your heart is melted; the hardness is melted; the tears flow, not because of fear but because of everlasting gratitude.

Billions cry out, “What must I do to be saved?” The Bible answer is, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ . . .” (Acts 16:30, 31).

You cannot tell someone who is “without strength” (Rom. 5:6) to “*do* something.” Salvation by works is useless. What you can do is to tell someone something to “believe.” Believe what? That “Christ died for the ungodly.” On His cross He identifies fully with the sinner. Darkness enveloped His soul. He was terrified of the second death that He faced. He was within a millimeter of coming “unglued” (see Ps. 22:14, 15). The cable that bound Him to sanity was only a hair’s breadth. But through that cable there flowed a millivolt of faith: “Why have You forsaken Me?” was His despairing cry, but He did ask the question. And He waited in the darkness for

the answer. He did not curse God, which Job's wife told him to do. And don't you ever do it!

Jesus doesn't ask us to *do* what He *did*; He asks us to *believe* what *He* did, that is, to appreciate it. In that total darkness of human despair, He built a bridge over our dark chasm—"the atonement." The Father did not reconcile the Son to Himself; the Son reconciled Himself to the Father. "You can forsake Me," cries Christ, "but I will not forsake You!" In the total darkness of being "made sin," suffering the ultimate hell of God-forsakenness (2 Cor. 5:21), being "made" us, bearing the total weight of our guilt, selfishness, despair, our hell, He is "poured out like water, . . . [His] heart is like wax, it is melted in the midst of [His] soul, [His] strength dried up" [He is "without strength," Rom. 5:6!],—in all this horror He chooses to believe a morsel of Good News: "Thou hast heard Me from the last utter extremity of being tossed on the horns of the vicious wild buffalo" (see Ps. 22:21). That millivolt of faith triumphed: "He hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; . . . but when he cried unto Him, He heard" (vss. 21-24). He chose to believe without an iota of outward evidence. Thus "*agape* never faileth" (1 Cor. 13:8). Tell someone!

When Mother Theresa was laid to rest, the lady stood at the world summit of being a doer of good works. As such, she was the apex in the history of many centuries of the sacrifice of Roman Catholic nuns who have devoted their entire lives to similar ministry. As missionaries they are the most extreme self-immolation of all missionaries. They renounce

the family life that enjoyed by Protestant missionaries who have a wife and children to whom they could return after days and weeks of lonely tramping through the wildernesses. Not they, who were deprived of the joy of being husbands or wives, or parents. Protestant missionaries have furloughs; many of them had none. Stayed there for weary decades. They have a very bleak existence. But the world rewards them as the supreme examples of self-less living. Their devotion is marvelous, and they deserve all the praise the world can give.

The self-immolation of priests, nuns, and monks, is a powerful testimony to the world for the Roman Catholic faith. It says something in favor of their religion! Eventually, says Revelation 13:3, the whole world "will wonder" at Roman Catholicism (the GNB says, "The whole world was amazed and followed"). That is very powerful motivation! And the appeal will eventually be almost overmastering for most people. Jesus says, that if it were possible, eventually even "the elect" will be "deceived" (Matthew 24:24).

The real underlying issue is that of motivation: If a life of self-denial is motivated by a desire for salvation and a desire to escape the torture of hell, then, says Paul "Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt" (Romans 4:4); it inevitably becomes legalism.

Two opposing principles will play themselves out in world history. Onto this great world stage steps a different motivation: that of what Revelation 14 describes as the verity of the third angel's message

(vss. 6-12). There will be a devotion to God and to our fellow-men that ultimately will have no self-interest involved, for the motivation will be purified by the blood of the Lamb.

We've all heard the story of the town where there was a cliff overhanging it. People would often fall off over the cliff and fall below and be wounded. So the good townspeople who were "caring" people built a hospital and sent an ambulance to pick up these hapless people who fell off the cliff. This went on for a long time until somebody thought of a better idea: why not build a fence at the top of the cliff to keep people from falling over?

I attended a prayer meeting where the faithful "caring" church members prayed for young people who used to attend church and Sabbath school who have now given up church and are out in the world. They used to attend Sabbath school and came through the church school and church academy. Some reliable estimates say that nearly 3/4 of such children turn away from the church by the time they are 18. And parents weep their eyes out. And every effort is made to send a spiritual ambulance to bring in these casualties.

Nobody hates the gospel of God's "grace" like Satan does. The word is there in both Galatians and Romans (yes, Ephesians), and he can't blot it out. So the best he can do is to "frustrate the grace of God," and inject into the idea some poisonous infiltration of legalism cleverly disguised. That's Paul's idea in Galatians 2:21 where he says, "I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain." In

other words, if an iota of self-seeking pride is mixed in with our "gospel," grace is "frustrated." Take a seven-course dinner prepared by the best gourmet chef imaginable, full of wholesome food, and add a mere 5% of arsenic, maybe even only one percent—if the dinner didn't kill you it would paralyze you. Take a sermon, an article, a book, that is 99% "gospel" truth full of Christian verbiage, and add one percent of subtle, poisonous legalism, and you have the recipe for "lukewarmness," the enervating malady that Jesus says afflicts His last-days church (Rev. 3:14-21). Wherever human pride or self-sufficiency raises its head even a little, there you can be sure the grace of God is being somehow "frustrated." "Righteousness by the law" is the sure result. Close by 2:21 in context Paul defines what he means by "grace": "before [your] eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified" (3:1). The people in Paul's Galatian audience forgot who they were, where they were, for he brought them to the cross and they saw, "comprehended," "the width and length and depth and height" of the revelation of that grace (Eph. 3:18, 19), as if they were at Calvary itself. They responded with what Paul called "the hearing of faith," precisely the same as Abraham's response ("he believed" when "God . . . preached the gospel unto" him, Gal. 3:6-8). I walk softly here; I tread on holy ground; here is the solemn truth behind all the "frustration" of confusion about the gospel that so afflicts the modern lukewarm church. As James Stewart said long ago, "No man can give the impression that he himself is clever and at the same

time preach Christ crucified.” “Who is sufficient for these things?”

Really good people keep asking the same question the Pharisees asked long ago, “What shall we *do* that we might work the works of God?” (Jn. 6:28). Israel were obsessed with that idea for they promised God, “All that the Lord hath spoken, we will *do*” (Ex. 19:8). That promise at Mt. Sinai was the “old covenant,” and it bound Israel to legalism through most of their history until finally they crucified their Messiah. But God has always had a better way—the “new covenant,” which is not the promise of the people but the one-sided promise of God, not a contract, or a “bargain” He makes with us. He promises to write His law in our hearts, and our part is to believe His promise. But the old covenant/new covenant tension still exists today, and the inherent legalism in the immensely popular old covenant discourages and perplexes multitudes, both in and out of the church.

Instead of our concentrating on what we must *do*, God asks us to look and see what He has done and is doing. He taught this lesson to the people in the wilderness - “when he [the one bitten by a serpent] beheld the serpent of brass, he was healed” (Num 21:9). Jesus said that “serpent” represented Himself (exactly backward, we would think!), and our continual “perishing” will come to an end if we “behold” Him as a “serpent lifted up” (Jn 3:14, 15) - a Savior “made to be sin for us” (2 Cor 5:21). “Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth,” He says (Isa 45:22). John the Baptist agrees, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh

away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29). Jesus says, “If I be lifted up [for all people to see Me] . . . I will draw all unto Me” (12:32). Paul saw his mission, to turn people’s ears into eyes and “to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery” (Eph. 3:9). John says, “Behold what manner of *agape*” (1 Jn. 3:1—that’s a refreshing sight to see!). Even Pontius Pilate preaches one unforgettable sermon: “Behold the man!” (Jn. 19:5). Here’s Good News: “a great reformatory movement” is coming, for God “will pour upon [His people and leaders] . . . the spirit of grace and supplication, and they shall look upon Me whom they have pierced” (Zech. 12:10). Behold that sight and you can never be the same lukewarm person!

But why not build a fence at the top of the cliff? Why not give these children and youth the pure gospel, the genuine Good News? The apostle Paul guarantees that it will work! It’s “the power of God unto salvation” he says (Rom. 1:16). And what is the Good News? Most of the time when these sad tragedies take place, the root cause for it is legalism. And what is legalism in contrast with the Gospel? Wherever you find the teaching that (#1) salvation is due to man’s initiative and man’s works, you are in an atmosphere of legalism. And when you find the teaching that (#2) our salvation is initiated by God, and is His work, you are in an atmosphere of the Gospel. #1 leaves the human heart cold, discouraged, in spiritual despair; #2 captures the heart, holds its affections, and motivates to faithfulness to God, because it is the

essence of the “atonement,” reconciliation to God
through the blood of the Lamb of God.

Let’s give somebody the Gospel today!