

Acts 16:16-34

Seventh Sunday Morning of Easter, May 23, 2004

“If you have any questions, I’ll be glad to make an *attempt* at answering them.” That’s what I often say to the Deacons in their monthly meeting or to the congregation at large in our Quarterly Church Conferences. I always say, “*attempt* to answer”, because I’ve heard folks, especially politicians, say “I’ll answer whatever questions you may have” only to discover they couldn’t answer some questions, even if they tried. Some questions simply aren’t answerable.

When it comes to unanswerable questions, I think of John Claypool whose daughter, Laura Lue, died a couple of months after her tenth birthday in January 1970. She had struggled harshly for just over 18 months, battling leukemia, until the cancer claimed her precious life on a snowy Saturday night. Some months before, in the dark of a hospital room one night, she asked her father if he had talked to God about her leukemia. He responded, “Yes, you’ve heard me pray to Him about it.” With all the insight a nine year old could gather, she asked, “Well, what did He say? When is He going to take it away?” Claypool said he wept, because he didn’t have an answer.

Nearly 12 years ago, three teenagers came to my office in Owensboro. Each introduced himself. One was designated the spokesperson, who very politely said, “We have some questions about God and hope you can give us some answers.” For the next hour and a half, they asked their questions and I made an attempt to answer each. A couple of their questions I couldn’t answer because there wasn’t an answer and I told them as much. I affirmed these young men in their quest for God and offered a word about His revelation in Jesus Christ, acknowledging that some things are unanswerable.

You know it’s true. “When am I going to die?” “What’s it like to die?” “When will Jesus return?” These are penetrating questions and they do not have answers, even though there are pundits out there who claim to have the answers, or simplify everything by saying, “Jesus is the answer to whatever your question may be.” That is true, but beware. Such a response is shallow and can create havoc for the spiritually immature, let alone the non-believer or pre-Christian.

I do find it fascinating that most penetrating questions relate to spiritual matters. Perhaps this is due to the fact that everybody has a spiritual side, a spiritual nature. It may not be Christian, but it is spiritual. And while some questions can’t be answered, I am glad that life’s most penetrating question has been asked and has been answered. The question? “*What must I do to be saved?*” The answer? “*Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.*” Simple, yes; profound, absolutely. Easy, yes; difficult, you better believe it is.

A nervous jailer, probably a retired Roman soldier who worked for the Roman Empire, asked the question long ago. I read the account here in Acts 16. This jailhouse scene provides us with an example of a conversion – from being a non-believer in Jesus to being a believer in Jesus. The unique power and authority of the Most High God, whose message Paul and Silas preached, is demonstrated by the earthquake that shook apart the prisoners’ chains and bars, but kept ceilings and walls safely intact. The jailer’s first inclination was to complete suicide when faced with what he believed to be his prisoners’ escape. In the Roman service, any failure of duty was deemed reason enough to attempt to complete one final act: suicide.

Paul and Silas saved the jailer’s life by calling out to him and assuring him of their continued presence. The jailer’s response appears to have been somewhat abrupt. Although there is no evidence that he had ever heard the Gospel message – except, significantly enough, within the context and content of the hymns Paul and Silas had been singing – this Roman jailer recognized a demonstration of profound power and might when he saw it. By asking life’s most penetrating question, “*What must I do to be saved?*”, this jailer became a part of the answer. He believed in Jesus Christ.

I think a lot of people are asking that question today. It may be devoid of any spiritual experience or a shallow spirituality at best, but I think people are asking it. Some people are asking when we are going to get out of Iraq. It's a question about saving lives. Some people are asking when gasoline prices are going to stabilize. It's a question about travel plans for the summer. Some people are asking how they can save themselves from financial ruin. It's a question about personal economic security. Many Americans get annual physicals or periodic check-ups with their physicians and dentists. Proper diet and exercise are daily rituals for many of us. Did you know I lost 16 pounds on the South Beach Diet and have been saved from having to go to a 33-inch waist? We see physicians and dentists, eat right and exercise to hopefully save ourselves from disease and premature death. ***“What must I do to be saved?”***

Even on the pages of the New Testament are found examples of salvation devoid of the spiritual, although spiritual lessons are often drawn from them. Once Jesus and The Twelve were out on the Sea of Galilee and a rough wind blew down those ravines from the eastern shore, creating a terribly turbulent situation on the lake. In Matthew's account of the story in 8:23-27, the disciples woke Jesus up and said, ***“Lord save us! We're going to drown!” (v. 25b)***. Jesus did what He did best. He saved them.

I think you see that this question may genuinely be devoid of the spiritual. On the other hand, that question may well contain something spiritual. It may be a well intended, but misguided spiritualism, but it's spiritual I suppose. I received a phone call from a preacher this past week who is concerned about how secular the culture is. He said, “What do we do to be saved from all this godlessness?” Given this text has been in my heart for a few weeks, I said, “Well Paul told the Philippi jailer to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. He's the key to being saved from godlessness.” In no way was I trying to be smart-alecky or simplistic. Before I could elaborate, the preacher said, “Don't give me that Jesus stuff. We have to get out here take control of matters ourselves.” And there are some people who worry about me being liberal! Truthfully, I don't think that brother realized what he said. But who knows in these “take control” days.

People are asking life's most penetrating question, even if they are unaware of it. The jailer did long ago. This fellow was sincere. He wanted to be saved from himself. Being a good Roman, he was prepared to take his own life, but in reality, like George Bailey in “It's A Wonderful Life,” he wanted to live. Who doesn't? There is a need in each of our lives to experience salvation and thus be saved from ourselves since for most of us we are our own worst enemy. Even saved people need saving from themselves. And it takes a great deal of courage for a believer to ask such a question as the jailer asked.

“What must I do to be saved?” Saved from my fear about the future. Saved from my hatred for people who aren't like me – whether they are from Baghdad, New York City, or Wedowee. Saved from my politics that may not coincide with the politics of Jesus. Saved from my ultra-extravagant approach to life. Saved from my lack of passion for Christ. Saved from my opinions that are just that: opinions not based on facts. Saved from my shallow spirituality. Saved from me. Wow! There really is much from which to be saved.

Here's what I think happened in that jail. Paul and Silas responded to a secular man's secular question with a spiritual answer and thus enabled that secular man to become a spiritual man. “You want to be saved from yourself? Then you need to turn away from yourself and look to Another. You need to turn to and believe in Jesus Christ.” I think these bold missionaries explained some of the particulars of belief, noting that believing involved much more than mere intellectual knowledge. It involved putting into practice what one believed.

“Now if you'll believe and put that belief into practice,” they said, “you will be saved – you and everybody in your household who is able to comprehend the message, if they, too, will believe. But you can't believe for them. They have to believe themselves. There can't be any salvation by proxy.” Did you notice that the text says they ***“believed”*** as well? Those in the jailer's household heard the message and each responded.

Responding to the answer to life's most penetrating question actually changes life for the better. The jailer opened himself up to the missionaries who had opened themselves up to him. They could have escaped, but did not. They remained right there in their prison cell because they sensed a most profound opportunity to share openly with one who was afraid and insecure. After "believing" in Jesus, He invited them into his home and extended genuine hospitality.

He did that because of the change that had taken place in his life. Responding to the answer to his question brought him closer to life itself. It brought him into a different kind of relationship with Paul and Silas, even his immediate family. He became authentic and surely spent the rest of his life authenticating the Gospel message by responding to those who would ask life's most penetrating question with the only answer.

That seems to be the case with Johnny Cash. The legendary Cash died last September. The "Man in Black" had a deeply spiritual side that was rooted in Jesus. He confessed right up front, though, that he was the biggest sinner of them all. His attitude of authenticity was encouraged by one of his best friends, Billy Graham. Dr. Graham encouraged him to keep singing "Folsom Prison Blues" and his other outlaw songs right along side the Gospel tunes. Graham told him, "Don't apologize for who you are and what you've done in the past. Be who you are and do what you do to the glory of God."

Could it be that the jailer of Acts 16 kept on being the jailer? Maybe. Maybe not. We'll not know until Heaven. Regardless, he asked life's most penetrating question and heard its answer. As a result of responding to the answer, he didn't have to apologize for who he was and what he had done in the past. He was himself and did what he did to the glory of God.

If there is anything needed in the church today it is people who have genuinely responded to the answer to life's most penetrating question by seizing upon its answer: ***"What must I do to be saved? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ."*** Do so and, like Johnny Cash and a Roman jailer, you'll not have to ever apologize for what you are or what you've done in the past.

"I'll attempt to answer any questions you may have." I can't answer every question because some have no answers. But I can answer life's most penetrating question. I pray I have today. So what are you asking? And what are you believing?

**Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor
Tabernacle Baptist Church
Carrollton, Georgia**

All scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are from Today's New International Version, 2001.