

**The First Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**The Baptism of Our Lord**  
**January 12, AD 2003**

*Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel*

**Acts 16:25-34**

<sup>25</sup> **About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. <sup>27</sup> The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"**

<sup>29</sup> **The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"**

<sup>31</sup> **They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." <sup>32</sup> Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. <sup>33</sup> At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. <sup>34</sup> The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family. (NIV)**

**High Stakes Q&A**

Brothers and sisters of our Lord,

As long as there has been television, there have been game shows. They're a mainstay of the TV schedule. Granted, recent hot hits like "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" and "Weakest Link" have disappeared, ending a run of popular prime time game shows, but they're not gone forever—that's my opinion, at least. There's something captivating about them. Some regular guy, sitting in the hot seat, his life on the brink of being transformed. He sits there, answering questions until the climactic moment comes. He could, in an instant, become fabulously wealthy—if he can answer one more question. His life as he knows it hangs in the balance. And then—"What is the capital of Guatemala?"

That's captivating TV. Question. Answer. High stakes.

Sometimes, though, it's far more serious when someone is asked a question. Take a courtroom, for example. There someone sits in the witness box, being cross-examined. His life hangs in the balance. He answers right—he is exonerated, and he goes free. He answers wrong—he goes to prison, or worse.

Questions. Answers. And high stakes.

Did you know that there is more than one example—real life example—of high stakes question and answer in the Bible? We have one of them in front of us today. In this instance, what hangs in the balance is more than a million dollars. It is the soul of a man and the souls of his family. All depends on a question he asks, "What must I do to be saved?" and the answer—God's answer to that question.

And here's why we should listen today: because this answer is one each of us in this room needs to know.

Question. Answer. And high stakes.

## Our question

The lead-up to this critical question is a story in itself...

It's the middle of the First Century AD. The scene is a bustling Roman colony in Macedonia, the city of Philippi. Paul and Silas are here. That's Paul, the famous early Christian missionary and his coworker Silas. Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, is along, too. Paul and Silas have in the last few days started a little Christian church that meets just outside the city gates, down by the river. One of the women of this group is supporting the missionaries with a place to stay. Her name is Lydia. She's a dealer in expensive purple cloth. The missionaries are now traveling through the city, speaking to people about Jesus Christ.

But something troubling happens one day. A slave girl who is demon-possessed begins following Paul and Silas around. The demonic spirit within her knows the enemy when he sees it. "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved!" the demon in the girl cries out. You'd think the missionaries would appreciate the free publicity provided by this demon, but they don't. Just as Jesus had felt when demons called out his name, these missionaries don't want a demon discrediting their message. But the demon within the slave girl keeps it up periodically for several days. Finally Paul has enough. "In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her!" he cries. And the demon does come out!

Everybody's happy, right? Wrong. The owners of this slave girl had been using her. The demon within her had supposedly been able to predict the future. They had made money off that. Now, though, the demon's gone—and so is the money. Their racket gone, the owners become furious at Paul and Silas. They trump up accusations that the two missionaries have been engaging in anti-Roman activity, and they have them flogged, the skin on their backs torn and bloodied, and then thrown into jail.

Enter a new character, the jailer. This man, on orders to guard these prisoners, puts Paul and Silas into the maximum-security cell. He puts their feet in stocks. If the stocks were of the kind often used in ancient prisons, they caused painful cramping in the prisoners' legs.

Does the jailer know the real reason Paul and Silas are imprisoned? Does he know about the demon-possessed slave girl shouting out, "These men are telling you the way to be saved?" Does the jailer know about the exorcism? Maybe. But even if he doesn't, this ordinary day in his life is about to become extraordinary.

It's midnight. These two prisoners in the dungeon are behaving strangely. They're not groaning in pain or complaining about the unjust and illegal imprisonment. No, they're praying out loud to God! And—what's that sound?—they're singing hymns! The other prisoners are listening to them.

Suddenly an earthquake hits. This earthquake has a special purpose: to free Paul and Silas. In a flash, the shackles and stocks fall off of them. The prison doors break open on their cell and all the rest.

The jailer, who had fallen asleep, wakes up. The first thing he sees is the doors to all the cells open.

Now, we should understand something about Roman law. If a prisoner escaped from jail, his sentence still had to be served. By whom? The prison guard who had let him escape. The jailer knows that he will be the one to suffer imprisonment and even death because his prisoners have, he assumes, escaped. So he draws his sword, and is about to kill himself.

But then he hears a shout. "Don't hurt yourself; we are all here!" It's Paul, the prisoner. Bewildered by the earthquake, the miracle of the open doors, the fact that he almost took his own life, the jailer calls for some torches. He rushes in to where Paul and Silas are and throws himself down to the ground, shaking. Then he gets up, takes Paul and Silas out of their cell, opens his mouth, and asks the high-stakes question: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

That's a question that's been asked more than once. When people are confronted with the realization that there's someone out there who's far bigger than they are, they ask. Maybe during an earthquake. Maybe out at sea in a fierce storm. Maybe in a foxhole, confronted with death. Maybe in a doctor's office, faced with a serious illness. There's an old saying, that some people don't think about God and their relationship with him until they're flat on their backs in a hospital bed. It can be true. Sometimes it takes a life-changing or life-threatening event to get someone thinking about—and asking about—God.

It's something people don't like to think about. This jailer, confronted with the supernatural, realized he was in trouble. Not just with his superiors in the Roman government (though I'm sure that was on his mind), but with God. It wasn't pleasant to think about. But he couldn't escape it.

Nor can we. We know there's a God out there, and our consciences tell us that not all is right between him and us. And if our consciences fail us, there's always God's written record of his law to remind us that he is righteously angry at us.

Our natural instinct, then, is to try to fix the problem ourselves. That's what the jailer was thinking. Did you notice the way he phrased his question? "What *must I do* to be saved?" We instinctively think the same way. "I'll try harder. Honest. This time it's different. God will have to give me some credit." If we work hard enough, if we do the right things, we reason, we will be saved from God's wrath.

That's where we're wrong. We are unable to get ourselves out of this mess of sin and guilt and failure. We can't do enough to get right with God. We are the problem, not the solution.

So what's the answer to this vital question? If I can't do anything in order to be saved, then who can?

### **God's answer**

Paul and Silas tell us as they told the jailer: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

The answer, in a way, doesn't fit the question. The jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas in reply tell him that it's not all about him doing something—that's not how he will be saved from the terror he feels in his conscience. It's not about him; it's about Jesus. He asks, "What must I do?" They reply, "You? You don't do anything. Instead, trust. Believe."

Then they turn the man's attention away from himself. "Believe in the Lord Jesus." Jesus is God's answer to our question. How will we be saved from God's righteous anger, from the guilt that we know is real? Jesus saves us.

Think back to the account of Jesus' baptism we heard awhile ago. (Mark 1:4-11) John told people to acknowledge their sinfulness, to repent. John led people to ask the same question that the jailer in Philippi asked: "What must I do to be saved?" Then John, as Paul and Silas did, directed people's attention to the one greater than he who was coming.

That event showed that it was going to be Jesus, and no one else, who would do the work of making the world right with God. Who would step into the role of Savior? Jesus. That's what John the Baptist was saying as he directed people's attention to Jesus. That's what Jesus showed as he walked to the Jordan River and stood side by side with sinners. That's what the Holy Spirit showed as he lighted on Jesus like a dove. That's what God the Father showed as he thundered from heaven, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." It all centers on Jesus. He's God's answer to our question.

Jesus is the one who did something so that we are saved. Jesus stepped in as our Substitute and he did what needed to be done. First, he won God the Father's approval. Jesus did everything right. He kept all the laws of God—every last one. He did that so he could give

his perfect track record of obedience to us. And then Jesus suffered all the disapproval and punishment that we had coming because of our sins. He paid the price, so that we could be saved from it. Now Jesus lives again and calls on all to trust that he did what needed to be done for us to be saved.

Back to the jailer. In answer to his high stakes question, he now has an answer. "What must I do to be saved?" The answer? "Don't do anything. Trust. Believe in Jesus, who did what had to be done to save you." The jailer evidently lived right by the prison. He took Paul and Silas to his family, and they all heard the good news about Jesus. Jesus—he was the answer to their question. Through the words Paul and Silas spoke to them, God brought them to trust Jesus, to believe in him. The jailer washed the wounds of the men he had put in shackles earlier. Then he and all his family were baptized.

On this day that we remember Jesus' baptism, we also think of our baptisms. Baptism, as the jailer and his family learned that night, is a special gift from God to us. In baptism, the simple application of some water in the name of God, God gives us amazing gifts. Through this washing, God covers us with the perfect record that his Son, Jesus, earned with his sinless life. Through this washing, God takes away all our sins, so that we are saved from suffering their punishment. Through Baptism, God unites us to Jesus, now risen from the dead, and gives us new spiritual life to live for him. Baptism brings to us God's answer to our question: Jesus, his perfect life, his innocent death, his resurrection and life.

"What must I do to be saved?" How would—or I should say, how *does* the world answer that question? Maybe by saying, "Believe in *yourself*, and you will be saved." Am I right? The jailer, by asking "What must *I do*", revealed our natural instinct. It's to look at ourselves to answer the highest of high stakes questions. But that's an answer that will never satisfy

God, however, turns us away from ourselves to his one and only Son. "Believe in Jesus, not in yourself, and you will be saved." He turns us to Jesus and what he did. He turns us to the word of his forgiveness and his sacraments. Through these means of grace, God makes the blessings of Jesus our own. Jesus. That's the answer we need to hear. It's the only answer that will work.

This is bigger than a game show. This is real life. The stakes couldn't be higher. We are on the hot seat. We answer wrong, we die. We answer correctly, we live. Forever.

Praise God this day that he gives us an answer to our high stakes question. The answer is Jesus. Amen.