

January 8, 2006

“Amazing Grace at Midnight”

ACTS 16: 25-34

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved-- you and your household." ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. ³⁴ 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.

It is the middle of the night. The doorbell rings. You wake up from your sound sleep. You look outside your window and see parked in front of your house a van with the large sign on it, "Publishers' Clearing House ." Camera people are walking up your front steps. You go to the door, open it and there are bright lights, an armful of red roses, and a cheerful voice that says, "Congratulations, you have just won one million dollars." Needless to say you would have a hard time sleeping that night. You might even call family and friends in the middle of the night to share the good news of what just happened to you.

We just read to you the account of a man who was given the greatest blessing a person could ever receive, not a check for a million dollars, but the gift of eternal salvation in Jesus Christ. This gift came to him in the middle of the night, when he least expected it from two prisoners who had been put into chains in the deepest part of the dungeon. Forget about going to sleep that night. Wake up the family. Let them share in this blessing, even before the first rays of dawn appear in the eastern sky. God's grace is always amazing, whenever salvation comes to people, but it is even more amazing when it comes to someone in the middle of the night when they least expect it. Let's take a closer look at this **"Amazing Grace at Midnight"** to appreciate God's amazing grace in your life and mine.

1) Crushed by the law

Before anyone can appreciate and believe in the blessings found only in Christ, they must be crushed and broken by God's law. God crushed this jailor's hopes and dreams, and dashed them to the ground. This crushing started with voices singing from deep down in the inner part of the prison. "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them." The jailor had seen the wounds on the back of Paul and Silas received from the people in the town who hated their message of salvation in Christ. He was there when they were thrown into the deepest

part of the dungeon, doomed to certain death by the infections that would soon enter into their wounds from the filth and vermin deep within that dark hole of a prison. Now at midnight, he and the other prisoners are hearing Paul and Silas sing hymns to the one true God.

I ask you this morning, why would the jailor be struck with fear and unnerved when he heard Paul and Silas singing in the prison? People have used songs on the field of battle to strike fear in their enemies. Zulu warriors struck fear into their enemies by chanting and striking their shields. Scottish highlanders struck fear in their enemies by playing bagpipes. The pope in Rome feared the songs of Martin Luther as much as he feared the writings, because the people were singing about the salvation they had in Christ. The Christians who were marched to death in the streets of Rome often sang the song the angels sang when Jesus was born, "Glory to God in the highest..." Songs in the middle of the night, songs from prison, songs from times of disaster that sing about the blessings we have in Christ, these are the songs that send a shiver of terror into the heart of someone who is not a Christian. They are left with the empty feeling in the pit of the stomach that tells them, "These people have something in their lives that I do not have."

The Lord also used an earthquake to shake up the jailor's life and crush his world the way you might step on an aluminum can or put your finger on an ant and crush it. "Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose." Where were you when the earthquake hit Paso Robles area a few years ago? The trembling of the earth shakes us up inside and turns our world upside down. This was no ordinary earthquake. It was a special quake sent by God that not only shook the foundations of the prison, but also popped open the locks in the doors and the locks on the chains that held the prisoners. "Everybody's chains came loose." The jailor's response to all this was fear for his life and fear that the prisoners had escaped. He had failed to do his job. His immediate reaction was to take his own life. "When he saw all the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, because he thought all the prisoners had escaped." The Romans had no mercy for anyone who let the prisoners escape on their watch.

Lynn James was her name. She never went to church in her life. Someone gave her a Bible but she never read it. She lived in fear of dying. When the garbage truck came to her house, she felt the rumble and thought of an earthquake and the possibility of facing death. One day she picked up the Bible and started reading, not at the beginning, not at the gospel of Mark, but at the end in the Revelation. She became so filled with fear from what she read that she started asking the friend on her bowling team the most important question anyone can ever ask, "What must I do to be saved?" Her friend shared with her the simple message "God so loved the world..." She also directed her to call me, and I had an opportunity to share the gospel with her. Eventually she started going to a Baptist church with some friends. She told me with joy in her voice, when the garbage truck comes, and I feel my house tremble, I am no longer afraid because I know what Jesus has done to save me.

Above the shouts and screams and fear in the prison, Paul heard the jailor crying out and threatening to kill himself. He called out to him, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" Then the jailor called for lights, rushed into the inner prison where Paul was. It says that he was "trembling," trembling in fear. He brought them out of the prison and asked

the most important question of life a person could ever ask, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" He wants to know the secret, the formula, and the plan by which he can work out his salvation. He wants to be able to have the confidence to face death and the joy of salvation that Paul and Silas displayed while they were singing that night deep within the walls of the dark dungeon.

In trying to teach children that we cannot save ourselves, we have used the illustration of trying to jump across the Grand Canyon. Kids line up and see how far they can jump. Some might jump three feet, some six feet, some here this morning might even jump ten feet. Some of you older folks might have a hard time jumping at all. When it comes to trying to jump across the Grand Canyon, even the best athletes in the world will ultimately fall short of the glory of God. This little string would never hold my weight if I were hanging from a cliff and needed to be rescued. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." "There is none that does good, no not one." The poor jailor wanted help, and he thought Paul had the answer on how he could improve himself to make himself acceptable to God. God's law had led this man to realize, "I need help. My belief system is not working."

2) Comforted by the gospel

Imagine the joy of the Apostle Paul as he tells this man how to be saved. "They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved-you and your household.'" This call to believe is a powerful call that comes from the Holy Spirit. It not only offers salvation, it actually creates within the heart the ability to believe and accept. Paul "spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in the house." Salvation was not just for his man who is calling out for help. Salvation is for the people living in his house, his wife and kids, the servants and relatives. Salvation is for all people. "God is not willing that anyone should perish but all should come to repentance."

The jailor ran to get his family. He wanted them to share in the blessing that had come into his life. They gather around Paul and Silas and see the wounds on their back, and listen to them as they speak. They had no Tylenol in those days. I wonder how much pain Paul even felt that night as he shared with these people the great truths of the Christian faith. He must have talked about the true God who created the heavens and earth. He must have talked about the way people rebelled against God and how sin is passed on to all people making them what they were. The jailor could certainly relate to that. He must have shared with them the false hope that people have of trusting in their own works. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin."

Think of the joy of describing who Jesus is, how he was born, how he suffered and died for sin, how he rose from the dead, how sin is forgiven and paid for by his death and resurrection. Think of the joy of seeing the Holy Spirit work through these words and create faith in the hearts of these people. And it is all happening in the middle of the night with the pain from the open wounds on your back almost unbearable. If you could have sung the words we sang together a few minutes ago, these people listening to Paul would have joined you in singing, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. That saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind but now I see."

3) The blessings of baptism

That glorious night, the jailor and his family experienced even more blessings. After hearing the message of free forgiveness in Christ, they took Paul and Silas and washed their wounds. As the water was poured on the wounds, it was not hard for them to further describe the blessings of baptism, a washing of water with the Word of God that would bring the further blessing of faith in their lives. "Then immediately he and all his family were baptized." They were baptized with water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The jailor took Paul and Silas into his home, and served them a meal. It says, "He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God."

Shortly before he ascended into heaven, Jesus told his disciples of every age. "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all things, whatever I have commanded you." Jesus was baptized to fulfill all righteousness. We are baptized to have the righteousness of Christ put on us. "We are all the sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." We joyfully say, not I was baptized, but I am baptized, because the blessings of baptism are a cause for our rejoicing every day of our lives. Amazing grace, it is always amazing at midnight, or in the morning, or at noon, or every moment of life. Amen.