

**January 8, 2012**  
**The Baptism of Our Lord**

*“Amazing Grace and the Blessing of Baptism”*

**ACTS 16:25-34**

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**A**bout 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.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me." John Newton, the man who wrote these words knew what it was like to be a wretch. His mother died when he was seven. He was put into boarding schools until he was eleven when he joined his father aboard sailing ships aboard the high seas. He picked up the worst habits of the crude and rough 18<sup>th</sup> century English sailors. He became such a wretch that even other sailors wanted nothing to do with him. They even made him serve the slaves he captured in Africa. One day he almost died in a storm. Fear gripped him and he thought of what his mother taught him about Jesus. He started reading the Bible, gave up his rough life at sea, and eventually became a pastor in the Anglican Church preaching to thousands of people. Today you can still visit the cemetery where he is buried in Olney, England and read this epitaph inscribed in stone: "John Newton. Clergy. Once an infidel and libertine. A servant of slaves in Africa. By the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy."

Amazing grace! That is what the Apostle Paul was privileged to experience in his personal life and also see first hand in the jailor of Philippi. He hears the man cry out in fear, "What must I do to be saved?" There was nothing this man could do to save himself. Contrary to what people think naturally without the work of the Holy Spirit, there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. Our only hope is to believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and receive the blessing of Holy Baptism. On this Sunday when we think of Jesus' baptism, we think of the amazing grace that has rescued us and given us the blessing of our baptism.

**The Fear**

John Newton was gripped by fear when he almost died in a storm. So it was with the jailor

in Philippi. There was something very unnerving and unsettling for this jailor when Paul and Silas sang hymns at midnight from the inner part of the prisoner. "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, the other prisoners were listening to them." Paul and Silas were badly flogged and beaten and their feet fastened to stocks in the inner prison. No one bothered to wash their wounds. No one gave them medicine for their pain such as we have today. They prayed and sang hymns to the Lord. They sang of God's love for them in Jesus and thanked the Lord for all the blessings that came into their lives. The other prisoners listened to them.

The great Zulu warriors of Africa struck fear in the hearts of their enemies as they sang their war songs while going into battle. The fierce warriors of Scotland struck fear in the hearts of their enemies by playing the bagpipes as they went into battle. Christians strike fear in the hearts of their enemies by singing their songs of salvation and their love for Jesus and his amazing grace. The prisoners who listened to Paul and Silas realized that these men had something in their lives that they did not have. I read somewhere that the Christians who were marched to their death in the Coliseum in Rome sang the song the angels sang on the fields of Bethlehem, "Glory to God in the highest."

I am holding in my hand a book with the title, "The Persecutor." It is the story of a Russian KGB officer who became a Christian. He tells how he was involved in cracking down on Bible study groups when communists were in control of the Soviet Union. The turning point in his life when he was gripped by the fear that the Christians he was persecuting had something in life that he did not have. One night he broke up a group and hit a sixteen year old girl across the side of the head. A couple nights later he broke up another group and saw the same girl with the black eye and swollen face where he had hit her. She looked at him with compassion and love and he could not get her glance out of her face. He started reading the Bible to find out what she had that he did not have.

People also tremble with fear when death comes knocking at their door as it did with John Newton when he nearly drowned, and for the jailor who experienced a violent earthquake. "Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose." The Lord sent this earthquake. It was forceful and focused, so focused that it caused the chains to fall off the prisoners. I am holding in my hand a jar full of marbles that I am going to shake so you hear the sound of marbles hitting the jar. The Lord has his way of shaking people up to get their attention and even creating fear in their lives.

The jailor woke up. Has an earthquake ever caused you to wake you up from your sleep? This was a quake so powerful it could knock you out of bed. "The jailor 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." There was the fear of dying from the earthquake and the greater fear of being executed by the Roman government for allowing prisoners to escape. Rather than face the fear of a violent and painful death, the jailor made the hasty decision to end his life. It still happens today. People cannot stand to face the problems that life brings or the prospect of a slow painful death so they take their own life.

Thank God Paul could see from the inner prison what this man was about to do to himself. He shouts out, "Don't harm yourself. We are all here!" In fear the man cries out, "What must I do to be saved?" He doesn't have it right does he? In his fear he thinks there is

something he must do to save himself and have the peace and joy that Paul and Silas had in their lives. The Lord has a way of breaking us down and showing us our sin in such a way that we cry out for help often with the words, "Lord, have mercy on me. Lord, save me. Lord, forgive me. Lord, help me.

Martin Luther was gripped by fear in his life. He was afraid of dying and facing Jesus on judgment day. He asked the question, "What must I do to be saved?" He tried everything to purge the sin from his life and save himself. In his one hymn he writes, "Yea deeper and deeper, still I fell, Life had become a living hell, So firmly sin possessed me." Then he expresses his hope with these words, "But God beheld my wretched state, Before the world's foundation, And mindful of his mercies great, He planned my soul's salvation." He heard the word of the Lord that said, "The just shall live by faith." At first it was a soft call, but then it became louder and louder, "The just shall live by faith." The hope of every human heart is not found in what I do to make myself right with God but by believing what Jesus has done to declare me righteous in his sight. God's amazing grace takes people like us who are born believing we can save ourselves, and leads us to trust in Jesus for everything. So it happened to the jailor as we see his fear turn into joy in Jesus and the blessings of baptism.

## **The Joy**

What a privilege it was for Paul and Silas to tell this man and all the others who were listening, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved- you and your household." The jailor asks, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul tells him there is nothing you can do. Jesus has done it all for you. He lived for you. He suffered for you. He died for you. He rose from the dead. He cried out from the cross, "It is finished."

It says, "Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house." Can't you see the joy on Paul's face as he tells the jailor and his family more about Jesus?" The painful wounds on his back seem small compared to the privilege of speaking to these people about Jesus. Is there any greater honor and privilege than being used by the Lord to tell another person who is gripped by fear what Jesus has done to save us and how much he loves us?

In 2 Corinthians 4 the Apostle Paul tells us that we bear about in our bodies the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ. What will the 2012 bring for us? I pray that it brings multiple opportunities to use our bodies and lives to tell people about Jesus and his amazing grace that has rescued us. We pray for the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to see the opportunities when they suddenly come to us as it did for Paul and Silas as they were singing praises to the Lord. We ask the Lord to shake up the lives of people we know and love so they cry out "Please tell me how I can be saved."

The jailor and his family listened to Paul and Silas talk to them about Jesus. He also tenderly washed the wounds on their bodies. Can't you hear the water that is being used to wash the wounds? Can't you hear Paul and Silas take about the water that can wash away sin, the water of Holy Baptism? The jailor and his family want to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. "Then immediately he and all his family were baptized."

And it says the jailor and his family were filled with joy because he had come to believe in God- he and his whole family.”

This morning we see Jesus come up out of the water after being baptized by John in the Jordan River. We see Jesus anointed by the Holy Spirit as the one to save us and rescue us. Everything that happened at Jesus’ baptism calls on us to put our trust in Jesus to rescue us not in ourselves. As we see Jesus baptized we think of our own baptism this morning. Your baptism is a gift of God’s amazing grace that brought Jesus to you. Galatians 3 tells us, “We are all sons of God through faith I Christ Jesus. As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Through your baptism Christ has been put on you. You wear his robe of righteousness.

Amazing grace! I am baptized. Whatever ups and downs come to you in his new year, you can say, “I am saved! I am baptized! Jesus has done it all for me!” Amen.