



First Presbyterian Church Hazlehurst, MS

July 2023 Newsletter

General Assembly

The 50th General Assembly of the PCA was held June 12-16 in Memphis, Tennessee. A full report on this year's assembly was given on July 12 during our prayer meeting. If you have any questions or want more information, please contact James.

Reformed Youth Ministries

We sent a Middle School and High School group to RYM in Panama City, Florida during the month of July. This year's theme was *Always Faithful*. The youth will give a report on RYM at our prayer meeting on July 26.



Isabelle, Ella, Megan, DaLinda, Ashby, Presley



James, Micah, Will, Colt, Brayden

Guest Ministers

Sunday, July 16 we were blessed to have two guest ministers preach. Perry McCall from Carolina Pres. in Madden, MS preached a sermon from Matthew 9:35-38 entitled *The Gospel Everywhere*. After our morning service we had a wonderful fellowship meal. That evening Ivor MacDonald from Hope Church in Coatbridge, Scotland preached a message from Mark 1:40-45.



MacDonald, Logan, McCall

Special Thanks

I am grateful to everyone who brought food and greeted our guests, Rev. McCall and Rev. MacDonald, so warmly. Our church is gifted in hospitality. Both ministers commented on what a wonderful congregation we have. I concur and thank God for each of you.

Men's Bible Study

Starting this Fall, we plan to begin a weekly men's bible study. Tentatively the study is scheduled for Thursdays at 10:30 a.m. Look for more information to come.

Reflections on Acts 16:30b-31

The most important question and the only right answer.

Throughout your life you have probably asked many important questions. Asking questions is one of the ways we learn. Asking questions is an admission that we don't know something and that we want to know. Asking questions is often a show of humility.

So, we have all asked a great deal of question as we have grown, but we have likely been asked many questions as well. If you're a parent or have been around children very long, you will know that they are quick to ask questions and have no fear showing that they don't know the answer.

In the text before us, we have a man who asks the most important question anyone can ask and to this question, he is given the only right answer.

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:30b-31 ESV).

You're probably quite familiar with the story of the Philippian jailer. Paul and Silas were in Philippi, which is in the region of Macedonia. They were going through the region looking for opportunities to proclaim Christ. You'll remember they met Lydia on a Sabbath day's prayer meeting and that, “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14b). Not long after that we're told that Paul was being followed by a slave girl who was possessed by a spirit which gave her the power of divination. This slave girl was on Paul's heels crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaimed to you the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17b). This went on for many days and finally Paul had enough and turned to the spirit and said, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her” (Acts 16:18b). The spirit did just that, but instead of there being celebration at this girl's deliverance from an evil spirit, her owners were angry because she was no longer able to make money for them through divination. So, Paul and Silas were brought before the magistrates who tore their garments and had them beaten with rods after which they were thrown into prison. The jailer was told to keep them safely, so he ordered they be put into the inner prison and that their feet be placed into the stocks. If you know anything about Paul's missionary journeys, you know that he was often met with great hostility and opposition (see [2 Cor.11:23-29]).

Because they were beaten, imprisoned, and in stocks, we might expect Paul and Silas to have felt sorry for themselves or to have asked why the Lord had allowed all of this to come upon them. After all, weren't they there as “servants of the Most High God” proclaiming “the way of salvation”? Persecution for righteousness's sake is not the focus of this reflection, but it is helpful for us to remember Jesus's words found in John 15:20. “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” Paul and Silas understood this, and their response was like that of Peter and John who, after being beaten by the Jewish leaders for their proclamation of the gospel, left the council “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:41).

Similarly in Acts 16 we find Paul and Silas holding a midnight prayer vigil, which included singing hymns to God. We're told “the prisoners were listening to them.” Paul and Silas haven't learned their lesson or at least that's what the magistrates would have likely thought. They were imprisoned for their service to the Most High God and, in prison, their service continues.

This reflection isn't about the need for prison ministry, but it's important to remember that God loves and saves prisoners. Jesus says as much when he speaks of his return and the judgement he is bringing with him. He will place his sheep, that is, his redeemed people, on his right and say, “I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me” (Matt. 25:36). God cares about all his people and because some of those individuals are in prison, he sends people to them to visit and minister to them. While I am sure Paul and Silas would have been fine with making this prison visit on different terms, they nevertheless

take hold of the opportunity. But we must leave this thought for the moment and return to the focus of our reflection.

At some point while Paul and Silas were praying and singing and the prisoners were listening, there was an earthquake which caused the prison's foundation to shake, all its doors to open, and everyone's restraints to be released. This is obviously the miraculous work of the Most High God. With everyone freed from their bonds and all the doors open, all there is left to do is to escape. That is what we would expect. Being familiar with the book of Acts that is something we have already encountered. Returning to Acts 5, the apostles were arrested and put in the public prison. "But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out" (Acts 5:19). Later in Acts 12, Peter was again freed from prison by an angel of the Lord. So, it wouldn't be wrong for us to expect Paul and Silas, who surely knew this to be the work of the Lord, to step out into freedom.

This is what the jailer expected to happen when he woke to find all the doors opened. He expected everyone to be gone so "he drew his sword and was about to kill himself." Rome didn't care about circumstances out of one's control. Rome only cared about a soldier doing his duty. This soldier was a jailer and was to keep prisoners in the prison. If the prisoners are set free, he has failed, and death would be the punishment. But again, Paul and Silas do the unexpected. They don't leave nor do any of the other prisoners. What kind of change has taken place in these men? What did they hear in the prayers and songs of Paul and Silas? Had they found true freedom? I believe so. I hope so. But that is not the focus of this reflection. Paul, knowing what the jailer was about to do, yells for him to stop and lets him know that everyone remained in the prison. None have left. The jailer confirms this by calling for a light to be brought in so he can see for himself. He then falls before Paul and Silas trembling in fear and bringing them out he asks the most important question, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

There is so much for us to consider when we reflect on this question. First, let's begin with the word saved. Saved from what? Why does the jailer feel that he is in need of salvation? Why does a jail full of prisoners who could have escaped now cause this man to seek salvation? You know, I can't exactly articulate an answer to all these questions. What I can say with confidence is the Holy Spirit used these events and maybe many others prior to this evening to convince this man he needed salvation. We can clearly answer the question, "saved from what?" Saved from the wrath of God. Saved from what his sins and our sins deserve. All of this came crashing down on the jailer in Philippi that evening. I said earlier that some of God's people are in prisons. That is true, but they're not all prisoners. God loves jailers too. Is this not incredible? Consider again the events that have occurred to cause this jailer to seek salvation. In brief: an unjust imprisonment, a midnight prayer vigil, an unbelievable earthquake, a full roster of inmates. God will stop at nothing to save his elect. That's how much he loves the Philippian jailer. That's how much he loves you too.

Maybe it didn't seem as dramatic in your experience. For most of us it doesn't, but we have no idea how God brought about all the things that we are completely unaware of but were used by Him to draw us to Himself. Our God will stop at nothing to save His children from what their sins deserve. He loves us. And, that love was what this jailer needed to hear about that night in Philippi, which is why Paul and Silas said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

In Jesus we see God and His love most clearly. We see God in the flesh who came to earth to represent His people by living a sinless life on their behalf and who went to the cross to receive the punishment that their sins deserved. This is how the jailer is saved. This is the only way anyone can be saved from the wrath of God: faith, believing in the Lord Jesus. You see, satisfying God's wrath can only be done by God himself. That is why he sent his Son. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). Surely, this truth was included as part of what Paul and Silas told the jailer when "they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house" (Acts 16:32).

In closing, let's return to the jailer's question. "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" I once asked an elderly saint about her assurance of salvation. I wanted this individual to be confident when she passed from this world to the next that she would see the shining face of Christ and be welcomed by the words, "well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:23a). This dear saint responded by saying something to the effect of, "Well, I've done all that I can do." As a pastor who has taken several different evangelism courses over the years, I immediately saw a red flag. I could hear an emergency horn blaring, and I began thinking about how I was about to lovingly correct this individual to make it clear that there is nothing we "do" to be saved. Fortunately for me, before I opened my mouth with what was surely going to be the most exegetically sound exhortation from a Pauline epistle, this dear saint continued. After saying she had done all that she could do, she continued by saying, "and the bible says that I have to believe, and I do." There was more to our conversation afterwards, to my benefit. But there was not a burden to convince this saint of the sufficiency of Christ. Instead, we marveled together at the love of our God in sending his Son to save his people. Do you have this salvation? If you want it, all you have to do in order to receive it is to believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

Regular Weekly Schedule

Sunday School – 9:45 a.m.
Sunday Worship – 11:00 a.m.
Children and Youth Bible Study – 2nd and 4th Sundays 4:00 p.m.
Choir Practice – 1st and 3rd Sundays 4:30 p.m.
Sunday Evening Worship – 5:00 p.m.
Wednesday Prayer Meeting – 5:30 p.m.
Ladies Bible Study – 1st Tuesday of each month at 9:00 a.m.

Current Series

Lord's Day Morning Worship – Genesis
Lord's Day Evening Worship – Luke
Sunday School
 Adult– Job
 Lower Elementary – Numbers and Deuteronomy
 Middle School – Revelation, Ecclesiastes
 High School – New Testament Survey
Wednesday Prayer Meeting – 1 John
Ladies Bible Study – A study through Joshua, Judges, and Ruth

Supported Missionaries and Ministries

Mark Horn – Hope Presbyterian Church
Plant PlantHopeOS.org

Johnny Williams – Sons of the King

Brett and Valerie McAlpin – Leeds
England

From Our Confessional Standards

We have been working through the Larger Catechism in our evening worship service and recently we confessed and reflected upon question 72 of the Westminster Larger Catechism.

Q. 72. *What is justifying faith?*

A. Justifying faith is a saving grace, [worked] in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and Word of God, whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, not only [assents] to the truth of the promise of the gospel, but [receives] and [rests] upon Christ and his righteousness, therein held forth, for pardon of sin, and for the accepting and accounting of [him] righteous in the sight of God for salvation.



This is a very fitting question to go along with our scripture reflection. The Philippian jailer was told to “believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.” You have probably heard similar things proclaimed from pulpits, street corners, and billboards. Or maybe you have heard a similar phrase, “Trust Jesus.” Both phrases are true, accurate, and of course biblical. But, to someone who does not know what we mean when we say trust and believe, these words can have very little meaning.

Let’s look briefly at the answer to question 72 of the Larger Catechism.

Justifying faith is a saving grace, meaning the saving faith a Christian possesses is not earned or deserved.

Instead, it is “worked in the heart of sinners by the Spirit and Word of God.” Faith is nothing we muster in ourselves. God must convince our hearts and he does by his Spirit and Word. This is why Paul and Silas “spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.”

It is by this working of God that a sinner is “convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition.” This is what the Philippian jailer knew the night of the earthquake and why he cried out, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” You must come to the realization you need salvation. Without doing so, you will see no need of Jesus. He didn’t die on the cross so you could somehow live a better life. He died because you needed a savior. He died because your sins must be forgiven by God if you are to escape his wrath.

But knowing you can’t save yourself is not enough. You must know what the bible says about Jesus, which is, “the truth of the promise of the gospel.” There are facts we must know and confess about Jesus even if we don’t fully understand them. The bible tells us many things about Jesus, but the essentials we must know in order to be holding on to the orthodox faith is that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, who is the only hope given by God for reconciliation with God.

But these truth claims found in scripture can be received as just that, truth claims. They can be believed as facts just as we can believe the fact that Joe Biden is the 46th President of the United States. As true as that fact is, I only know it as a fact. I am not depending on that fact to do anything for me, except maybe continue the conflict between democrats and republicans. This is why the confession teaches what scriptures say concerning justifying faith. Those who possess justifying faith “receive and rest upon Christ and his righteousness.” Whether I’m a democrat or republican, I am not resting upon the fact that Joe Biden is the 46th President of the United States. I know it is true. Just as I know $2+2 = 4$. But neither of those facts do anything for me other than simply show themselves to be true. But trusting in Jesus, his righteousness, and resting in his finished work on my behalf changes me.

Do you have this change? The ability to trust in Christ is the work of God. It is a saving grace given to you by the work of the Spirit and the word of God and this is what saves you. Jesus! He saves you. You do not rest in your knowledge of Christ. You do not rest or trust in your good works. You rest in Christ and his righteousness. This is why you can rest. If any part of your salvation was dependent upon you, you would be delusional to think that you could rest. But Christ says, “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matt. 11:28). We rest not in our righteousness but in Christ’s.

It is through resting in Christ that we find “pardon of sin” and are counted “righteous in the sight of God for salvation.” The two things that the Philippian jailer needed and that you and I need is to have our sins forgiven, for them to be remembered against us no more, and to be perfectly righteous before God. That is what Jesus has done for us. That is why the Father sent the Son, to pay the penalty for our sins (so that our sins can be forgiven) and to live a righteous life on our behalf. God credits all those whose faith is in Christ as righteous based upon Christ’s perfect obedience and righteousness.

This is what the Philippian jailer needed to know. This is what we need to know.

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