

HE SPRANG IN TREMBLING

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 8, 1961 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

On Paul's second missionary journey he came to the city of Troas, and while there saw a vision in the night of a man of Macedonia, saying, "Come over into Macedonia and help us." Inasmuch as he is described as a man of Macedonia, I presume that he was a real man, a man of a certain locality. "And when he had seen the vision," Luke continues the story, "straightway we sought to go forth into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel unto them. Setting sail therefore from Troas, we made a straight course to Samothrace, and the day following to Neapolis: and from thence to Philippi, which is a city of Macedonia, the first of the district, a Roman colony: and we were in this city tarrying certain days." (Acts 16:9-12).

Acts 16

There then follows in this 16th chapter of Acts the story of the conversion of Lydia, a very interesting and wonderful story of the conversion of a business woman. The next paragraph tells about Paul and Silas casting a demon out of a soothsaying maiden. She had been managed by some men who saw that there was the possibility of gain in using her special ability. When the demon was cast out they were angry. The story continues, "But when her masters saw that the hope of their gain was gone, they laid hold on Paul and Silas, and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers, and when they had brought them unto the magistrates, they said, These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city, and set forth customs which it is not lawful for us to receive, or to observe, being Romans. And the multitude rose up together against them: and the magistrates rent their garments off them, and commanded to beat them with rods. And when they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into prison, charging the jailor to keep them safely: who, having received such a charge, cast them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks. But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns unto God, and the prisoners were listening to them; and suddenly, there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison-house were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened; and everyone's bonds were loosed.

"And the jailor, being aroused out of sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm; for we are all here. And he called for lights and sprang in, and, trembling for fear, fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shall be saved, thou and thy house. And they spake the word of the Lord unto him, with all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes, and was baptized, he and all his immediately. And he brought them up into his house, and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, with all his house, having believed in God." You recognize this as a reading from Acts 16:9-12; 19-34.

Fact Number One

There are ten significant facts in this story that I want to point out. First of these facts is one that I hope you will seriously consider in relation to yourself. It is the fact that this Philippian jailor did not know that he was lost. He was busily engaged in his occupation, one of which he probably was a little proud. Rome was the ruler of the world, and he was one of the Roman jail-keepers.

That would mean wearing a uniform. It would mean that he would have certain privileges and certain pay. He was a pagan; he was a Gentile. There had been some Jews in the city, who had been preaching. They had stirred up quite a controversy, but that was no concern of his. If someone had met him and had asked, "What do you think of Christianity?" If he had thought anything at all about it he would probably have replied, "It is no concern of mind." He was lost and completely without hope, yet he did not know it. He was utterly unconcerned. He needed to be concerned so this story unfolds to show how God caused him to get concerned.

The reason why I am particularly underlining this first fact--the jailor's complete indifference to the gospel is that there are millions and millions of people today who are likewise unconcerned. They have no special brief against Christ and no special dislike for the gospel, but it simply has no place in their lives. They, like this Philippian jailor, are preoccupied with something else.

Fact Number Two

The second fact in this story was that God sent an earthquake. Our text says in the 26th verse, "Suddenly there was a great earthquake." The foundations of the prison house were shaken. I have often wondered if they had to rebuild the prison or whether they had to move out and use a different building. The earthquake shook it, but that is not the main thing in this story--the earthquake shook this man. He was literally shaken. He was sound asleep, for it was midnight when this earthquake came and waked him up. That is the second fact.

Right here I would like to pause to make another comparison. Sometimes I have talked with people who were basically good people, but somehow had just not got around to the matter of becoming interested in the gospel. Sometimes I have gone away with a heavy heart thinking, "Something will have to happen in order for him, or her, to become interested." In a sense, what I have meant is, "The Lord is going to have to send an earthquake." That earthquake might come in the form of a serious illness. Many a man while lying on his back in a hospital has waked up to the fact that he was lost and that he needed to do something. I am thinking of a man who, a few years ago, had a heart attack. Out of his fright, there came the desire to do something about his soul. It was a genuine thing, for it lasted the rest of his life, which amounted to a number of years.

Sometimes this earthquake comes in the form of the death of a loved one. Some of you may remember a man of this congregation a few years ago, who had been a Christian in his early years but who for nearly half a century had not attended the worship services of the Lord. After his wife died, the very next Sunday he came and sat on this front bench, to rededicate his life to the Lord. He did not miss, as far as I can remember, even one Lord's day in the years that followed. I am sure that the tragedy of his wife's death brought him to his senses and made him realize that he was out of duty and needed to come back and begin again.

Sometimes this earthquake in our lives comes through the loss of possessions or the loss of reputation. Sometimes it comes through our own failure. When we are down we realize that we are not as strong as we thought we were. Out of that failure, out of that shaking, we turn to the Lord for his guidance and help. This is not an unusual thing, in fact, it is quite common to find that people must be shaken before they realize that they are lost and that they need to do something about it. I am mentioning it now in order that we may not wait for some tragedy, or life-shaking event, to decide to be a Christian.

Fact Number Three

The third fact in this story is in the 29th verse. After the jailor was shaken, "He sprang in ... trembling for fear." Think of the sudden change in this man's life. He went to bed that night perfectly satisfied. Undoubtedly he had in mind what he would do the next day, but at midnight everything was changed. In the middle of the night he realized that something tremendous had happened, and he was afraid. It is good for us to tremble. We often become so well-satisfied and so overconfident that it is good for us to be afraid.

Fact Number Four

Then comes the fourth fact. After his trembling, there was a humility. He fell down before Paul and Silas. Before we can become Christians we must bow down. There has to be a humbling of our hearts. Can you imagine this pagan, this Roman, bowing down before a Jew from Palestine, a man of a despised race and an occupied country? Yet he was humble enough that he bowed before Paul and Silas.

Fact Number Five

Next is fact number five. He asked the most important question ever asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Of all the billions of questions, this is the most significant one. His question indicated that man must do something. "What must I do to be saved?" The greatest part of salvation depends upon God, upon his love and upon his giving of Christ on the cross. The greatest part of salvation comes through God's gift, but we cannot fail to see that there is a part that man must do.

Fact Number Six

Then there is fact number six. "They said, Believe on the Lord Jesus and thou shalt be saved, thou and thou house." There is no other place to begin. "Without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarded of them that seek after him." (Heb. 11:6). When man asks, "What must I do?" that doing begins with, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved."

Fact Number Seven

Then comes fact number seven. "They spake the word of the Lord unto him with all that were in his house." This sentence contains several hours of time and many, many facts concerning Jesus. The gospel was preached. Paul may have begun with the prophecies of Christ's coming. No doubt they were in it. Then he told about his birth and his boyhood, perhaps. Certainly he told about his ministry, how it began, how he was baptized and how for more than three years he worked miracles and taught. Remember, this man was a pagan. To him it was a strange language, a new world. They preached unto him Jesus. It would take a while. He would ask questions, and they would answer.

Fact Number Eight

After a while, when the preaching was done, there came fact number eight. "And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes and was baptized." That is an amazing thing, and it is wonderful. Later in the same sentence, it says, "He and all his immediately." The human, natural thing would have been to say, "Well, this is a very interesting thing you have told me; I want to talk

it over with some of my friends and relatives. I would like to mention this to my father and get his reaction. I certainly will want to talk with my superiors to see if it would be permissible for me to become a Christian.”

Do you realize that in all probability he lost his job out of all this? If Paul and Silas were imprisoned for being Christians, it is not likely that the Romans would tolerate a Christian jail-keeper. The Romans would not be very enthusiastic about his continuing to be one of their jail-keepers, when he worships a man whom they have crucified, as an insurrectionist or imposter. Just let the word filter up through channels and get high enough and this man’s job is gone. But the wonderful thing about it is that he does not put it off. He does not say, “Let me consider it; let me think about it; let me sleep on it; let me see if I can keep my job.” The wonderful thing is that the same hour of the night he and all his were baptized immediately. That is tremendous. This man was a great man. He had decisiveness in things that count.

Do we not need that now? I have wished many times that I had the power of making the gospel seem urgent to people, of somehow making it take hold of a man so that he does something now, not tomorrow, not next year, but right now. How can we do it? Here was a man that came from further away than any of us. He was a pagan, and yet he came immediately. The man did not even know he was lost, yet between midnight and dawn he discovered he was lost, discovered the way to be saved and did something about it right then.

Fact Number Nine

Next, there is fact number nine. He immediately began doing some things that Christians ought to do. These men who had preached to him had stripes on their backs from the “cat of nine tails.” There was dried blood there. So he began his good work by taking them and washing them and bringing them into his house. He was not baptized in his house, for there was no baptistery there where he could be immersed. They had to go out, perhaps to the riverside that we read of earlier in the same chapter. After the baptism they came back into his house and he set food before them. Paul and Silas had had no supper. They were dragged, beaten, and thrown into prison.

Fact Number Ten.

Finally, there is fact number ten. The story ends, “They rejoiced greatly, with all his house, having believed in God.” Does it not thrill you? Here is a man that was lost and half a dozen hours later he was saved with a whole new life opening before him, and with a new destiny.

Let this story come to life in your heart, if you are not a Christian. Do you not need to do what this man did? He and his whole household believed in Christ. All were old enough to be taught, to believe and to rejoice afterward. There were no babies sprinkled in this story. The gospel was preached and they obeyed it. If you are old enough to believe in Christ you are old enough to want to be saved eternally in heaven. It is not some day, but now that you should come. May you have the strength to say, “I am coming; I am coming now.” Let the urgency of the gospel take hold of you now.