

This past Tuesday, a man entered a restaurant in Fort Mill, SC, pulled out a gun, and shot and killed a teenage cashier. He had no connection or motive; just the senseless killing of a 19-year old girl. Two weeks ago, a pastor from Merrill, WI crossed the center line while driving his pickup truck and collided with a semi. After a few unresponsive weeks in the hospital, he passed away on Monday. I’m certain that that girl didn’t go to work thinking she wouldn’t come home. Nor did that pastor get into his truck assuming he’d get in an accident that would eventually end his life. Talking about both of these unexpected deaths, I heard people say with sad headshakes, “You just never know.”

The reality of our mortality is obvious, but it’s often unexpected. That fact intensifies the urgency of the question, “If you died tonight, where would you go?” It isn’t just a philosophical question. It’s a legitimate possibility. On your drive home. As you eat lunch. As you work, or workout. When you’re asleep, or awake; you just never know.

And I know. “Pastor, this is pretty heavy stuff!” Understand, I’m not trying to scare you or send our guests away thinking, “That’s a depressing church!” I bring it up, because it’s an important question for everyone to answer honestly. “If you died tonight, or right now—where would you go?”

Certainly, people give various answers. “I’d go to Heaven.” “I’d probably go to hell.” “I hope Heaven, but I’m not really sure.” “I’d go in the ground, and that’s it.”

But maybe more important is the follow-up question. “Why would you go there?” You’d probably hear answers like, “I’ve been a pretty good person.” “I always tried to be kind and help others.” “I went to church.” “I loved my family.” Or, “I’ve done things that can’t be forgiven.” “Because God doesn’t exist.” How you answer those two questions is important, because your answers shape the attitudes and actions of your life.

In Acts 16, we meet a man, called simply “the jailer,” who struggled to answer those questions when suddenly faced with his mortality.

Let me paint the scene for you. The book of Acts records the mission work Jesus’ followers carried out in the newborn Christian church. About 20 years after Jesus’ Ascension, we follow the footsteps of a man named Paul, and his missionary partner Silas, during their second missionary journey, in which they shared the good news of Jesus in cities of modern day Turkey and Greece.

In our sermon text, Paul and Silas were in the city of Philippi. As they ministered around the city, a demon-possessed slave girl followed them. She was a lucrative possession for her owners, because the demon allowed her to predict the future, and people paid big bucks to hear her.

For days, this girl stalked Paul and Silas, the demon using her as his mouthpiece to scream, **“These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.”** It was a true message, but imagine trying to listen to my sermon if someone was standing right here screaming the whole time! Eventually, Paul turned around and in Jesus’ name, drove the demon out of her.

The girl’s owners were irate, because Paul had broken their money-maker, so they had Paul and Silas thrown into prison. The jailer **“put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.”**

We might expect Paul and Silas to be angry, screaming about the injustice; or to weep, terrified what would happen to them. Instead, **“About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”** Unjustly locked away in prison, they praised God! Isn’t that a strong example of their faith?

As they praised, the prisoners listened intently. The jailer must have thought they were crazy. He'd certainly heard his share of screaming, weeping, or silent prisoners. But singing praises? That was new. Paul and Silas made an impression.

Suddenly, the evening hymn sing was interrupted by an earthquake that shook the foundation of the prison, and ***"At once, all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose."*** It quickly becomes obvious that this was no ordinary earthquake.

In the commotion, the jailer rushed in. Seeing all the cell doors open, he assumed the prisoners had escaped. In that day, jailers who let their prisoners escape were punished for the crimes of the escapees. He must have been guarding some death row inmates, because the jailer despairingly drew his sword to kill himself. Face to face with mortality, ready to end his life, he heard, ***"Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"***

The jailer who once held complete power over the prisoners now throws his terrified, trembling body at the feet of Paul and Silas. He wasn't terrified because of the earthquake. It had stopped. He wasn't afraid of punishment. No prisoners had escaped. He was terrified because he realized what had happened.

The hymns of praise; the sudden earthquake; the inexplicable opening of the restraints; his suicidal brush with death. The jailer was terrified, because he realized he had come face to face with the power of God. And that made him feel very powerless, helpless, and hopeless.

God doesn't always use an earthquake. Maybe it's a heart attack, a stroke, a tumor, an accident, or a virus to reveal to self-dependent people how powerless they really are; how mortal; how sinful. Sinners standing before an almighty God, whose expectation is ***"Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,"*** have plenty of reason to fear.

Did you ever get in trouble as a kid, and your mom told you, "Wait until your father gets home"? Remember the fear which consumed you as you awaited his arrival? The fear is far more consuming for those who have sinned against the almighty, holy God, whom they could meet at any second.

But it's not just "other people." When Paul writes, ***"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"*** that "all" includes us. Our sin means we should be terrified of God, just like the jailer.

Maybe it was because he'd heard the girl's message, "These men are telling you how to be saved." Maybe it was because he heard them praising God. Either way, desperate for salvation, the jailer begged Paul and Silas for answers. ***"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"*** Notice, his automatic assumption: "I have to do something!"

Don't we all make the same assumption? If you screw up at work, you have to work extra hard to get back on the boss's good side. If you upset your spouse, you do nice things to make up for it. So it's unsurprising that people assume we have to balance the good with the bad to get on God's good side. As Christians, we do this too. Sometimes it's subtle, thinking that coming to church is something we do to square things up with God, not something he does for us! Other times it's bolder, blatant works righteousness, thinking we have to earn salvation.

Trying to earn God's favor is as hopeless as trying to run to Green Bay on a treadmill. No matter how hard you try, you're in the same place you started. That mindset drives us to run an endless race in a hamster's wheel, striving and failing continually to win God's favor, because even just one sin means we've failed completely.

But instead of a checklist, the jailer is surprised to receive a "checked off" list. ***"They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your whole household.'"*** Not, "Do this, this, and this." But, "this is what God has already done!"

Paul and Silas ***“spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.”*** Paul and Silas taught the jailer’s household how Jesus came into the world to ***“fulfill all righteousness,”*** living a sinless life as the perfect substitute for the sinful world. They explained how Jesus suffered the punishment of hell on the cross, and died the death our sins deserve. They taught that through the faith, another gracious gift from God, sinners receive the forgiveness Jesus won. They taught that baptism washes sin away; in baptism, the cell doors of hell swing open, and the chains of sin and death fall off.

The gospel changed the jailer’s life completely in just a few hours! ***“Then immediately he and all his family were baptized...He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family.***

As the earthquake struck, the jailer was ready to kill himself, completely despairing of life. Now, just a few hours later, he stood in the utter joy and peace of eternal life! He went from the pleading question, “what must I do to be saved?” to trusting that Jesus had done everything for him! After Paul and Silas taught them about Jesus, and about baptism, the jailer’s family was baptized as soon as possible. If you, your children, or grandchildren have never been baptized, our pastors would love the chance to talk to you about the blessings of baptism, and make it happen for you!

I said before that we’re included in the “all” of “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” But we’re also included in the “all” of the second half of that verse. ***“And all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”*** We too can now stand before God without fear. We can face mortality, even unexpected. Because it’s not about what I have to do. It’s all about what God did for me in Christ.

The good news of Jesus completely changes our lives too. From trembling fear over sin, to pure joy in forgiveness. Complete confidence of salvation instead of paralyzing uncertainty of damnation. You have perfect peace in Jesus. Step off the treadmill of trying to earn salvation and rest! If you died tonight, where would you go? I pray you can answer, “I’d go to Heaven.” Why? “Because Jesus is our Savior.”

That’s what those two people, 19-year old Karson Whitesell, and the 58-year old Pastor Jim Weiland had in common: They believed that Jesus is their Savior. That’s why their families and WELS congregations rejoiced in the eternal victory they won this week. By Jesus, no matter how unexpectedly, they were ready. And by faith, so are we. “What must I do to be saved?” Nothing. Jesus has done it all! When will death come? You just never know. But Jesus has saved us. That, we know!