

Home at Last: Joining The Family

WITH MIKE TUCKER

Once, while I was working as a hospice chaplain, I called one of our patients and asked if it would be all right for me to pay her a visit. She said, "Well, you know I'm an atheist! But if you want to visit, I won't try to stop you." I told her I would like to meet her, so I scheduled the visit.

I had planned to make small talk and to attempt to win the woman's confidence in the hope of being of some help to her as she faced death. But she would have none of it. She immediately confronted me with questions about the existence of God.

At first, I thought she was trying to prove to me that God did not exist, but then I realized that this was not the case. She wasn't trying to prove that God didn't exist – instead, she was looking for a reason to believe that He *did* exist. When I realized this, our conversations began to take a different focus.

In the weeks before she died, I was able to lead her to faith in Jesus as her personal Savior. This woman concluded that enough evidence existed to give her a reason to take a leap of faith, and she committed her life to Christ. She died being assured of her course for eternity. She would eventually be home.

I found a biblical example of a man who also found enough evidence to make a leap of faith. This man, too, was suddenly facing the possibility of death – perhaps even death at his own hands.

We find his story in the New Testament book of Acts, the book that tells the story of the early Christian Church. The stories in the book of Acts begin after the ascension of Jesus and chronicle the spread of the Gospel throughout the then-known world.

In the 16th chapter of Acts, we learn of the imprisonment of the apostle Paul and his companion, Silas. They had traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony in Macedonia. While there, they upset the owners of a slave girl by casting a demon out of her. Her owners had made a great deal of money by exploiting this girl, and now their source of income had dried up. Seeking revenge, they had Paul and Silas arrested, beaten, and thrown into prison.

Now, the beating and imprisonment were actually against the law, because Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. They were Jews who had been born in a Roman province, thus giving them Roman citizenship. That citizenship entitled them to certain legal rights that had been denied to them in Philippi, because the magistrates didn't realize that these two Jews had Roman citizenship.

That night after the arrest, while the two men were in prison, something happened. Let's read about it in Acts 16, beginning with verse 25.

Acts 16:25-28

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. 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. 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. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

In those days, if a prisoner escaped from prison, the jailer who was responsible for the prisoners was subject to arrest, trial, and execution. The threat of this made jailers take particular care that prisoners would not escape.

When the earthquake opened the prison doors and loosened chains, the jailer naturally assumed that his prisoners had escaped. In an effort to spare himself the inevitable arrest, trial, and potential execution, the jailer decided to commit suicide. Paul anticipated this and wanted to save the life of his jailer, so he shouted out that everyone was present.

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Acts 16:29-30

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

The jailer had believed that his life was over. He had stared death squarely in the face, and it had an affect on him.

I've been with people who knew they were going to die. They realized that death was eminent, and that realization caused them to think differently about life and death and eternity.

One night in 2012, my wife's cousin, David Osborne, was piloting a private plane with two passengers on a trip from North Dakota to Topeka, Kansas. There was no moon that night, and the sky was overcast, so the stars weren't visible. Just north of Topeka, the cabin suddenly began to fill with smoke. The engine had failed, and David had no choice but to try to find a place to land – any place to land – but it was pitch dark and they couldn't see a thing.

Finally, the men spotted some headlights on a road below, so that's where David decided to land. Praying all the way, he headed for the road. On the way down, the plane clipped some trees, tearing off one wing. They narrowly missed a house and some power lines, but somehow, David managed to land the plane on the road. Miraculously, all three men survived. Two of them actually walked away from the crash with minor injuries.

David was credited with praised for his calmness and for incredible skill as a pilot, but he knows it was nothing short of a miracle.

Gayle talked with him just two weeks ago. He said, "You don't walk away from that kind of situation. There is no way I should be alive. You know, when you're sure that you are going to die in the next five minutes, it changes the way you think. You realize what is actually important."

Very few things matter to those who are about to die. Beyond family and loved ones, the only other things that matter have to do with life's meaning and the possibility of eternity.

That was the jailer's position. He asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

In reality, this is everyone's question, and it is the only question that really matters. The jailer's brush with death had brought him to that realization. It jolted him into seeing his need.

Have you been jolted? Has something happened to make you see that you need something – something that will fill the emptiness inside?

Or maybe it hasn't happened as a jolt with you. Maybe it has been a more gradual process. Over time, there came this gnawing realization that you were empty inside, or you just knew you needed something more – something you were unable to supply for yourself.

The jailer recognized his need and asked that all-important question, "What must I do to be saved?" And Paul and Silas answered his question in verse 31.

Acts 16:31-32

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.

The jailer was from a culture of paganism. This was a culture that offered little hope that there could be anything after the grave.

Many of the philosophies of today aren't much different. The one thing that all modern philosophers appear to have in common is this sense that life is meaningless – that hope is an

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illusion – that despair rules the day. The philosophies of today offer no hope of anything after death.

But Paul and Silas offered much, much more through the provision made by Jesus. They introduced the jailer to Jesus, teaching him and his entire household about the One who could chart a different course for life and lead them to an eternity in Heaven.

The jailer committed his life to Jesus, and it appeared to have an immediate effect on him. The jailer began to imitate the deeds of Christ through acts of service he performed for Paul and Silas. Read about it in verse 33.

Acts 16:33-34

At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. 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.

At that late hour, the man took care of the wounds Paul and Silas had received when they were beaten. Then he took them out of the prison and brought them into his own home and fed them.

Evidently, Paul and Silas used this occasion to teach everyone in the jailer's household about Jesus, and they, too, came to faith in Christ. All of them were baptized.

We began this series of meetings by saying that we were on a quest for genuine spirituality. We wanted to chart a course with Jesus and draw closer to Him – to experience more and more of Him. We have found that there are various steps to the intimacy with God that we have always craved.

In this story, we find a progression in the journey of faith. It is the same progression we are beginning to see in our own lives as we seek for more of God.

The first step is to recognize our need. This is what the jailer did. When he thought that the prisoners had escaped, he assumed that all was lost and that there was no hope for him. But then, when he learned that no one had left the prison, the jailer recognized that these men had something that he didn't have. They had something this man longed for and yet could only dream about. So he asked the most important question anyone could ever ask. "What must I do to be saved?"

That is the first step. We recognize that we have a need. We cannot save ourselves, and we cannot manufacture the fulfillment our hearts have longed for.

The next step was that someone had to introduce this man to the Savior. Someone had to show him exactly who Jesus was and is. They had to teach him about the One who has always loved, the One who saves.

Paul and Silas opened the pages of Scripture and shared the truth about Jesus. That's what we have been doing here on a nightly basis. We have been looking at Jesus and all the ways we can draw closer to Him.

The next step that the jailer took was to commit his life to Jesus.

Many of you have already done that. You have made the decision to follow Jesus and to trust Him for your salvation.

If you have not yet made that decision, I encourage you to do it this evening. Confess your sins before Jesus and claim his free offer of salvation. Dedicate your life to Him so that you will live with Jesus as your Lord.

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But there are more steps to take now. The jailer and his household acknowledged their commitment through baptism. They followed the example Jesus left us by being baptized.

And the result of that was the last step. They experienced great joy! We still experience great joy when we follow Jesus in baptism.

For some of you, baptism is a new concept. The word, *baptize*, literally means to immerse – to be covered completely with water. That is what Biblical baptism is. Every example of baptism in the New Testament is of someone being immersed. John the Baptist preached in the wilderness by the Jordan River. The Bible says that John chose a particular place since there was a lot of water there, and he could immerse those who chose to be baptized.

This seems strange and even undignified to some, but it is the symbol given to us by Jesus Himself as an outward sign of our inward decision to follow Him completely.

A number of years ago, we served as pastors of a large church in Arlington, Texas. In our church family was a lovely couple that was helping to raise their young granddaughters. When they began attending, their granddaughters had not had a lot of experience with church. At the time, the girls were about 5 and 7 years old.

One of the first weeks they worshipped with us, we had the doors to the baptistry open and ready for a baptism, which meant that the water in the tank was visible to the congregation.

When the girls saw that water, it was an entirely new thing to them. The youngest said, “Look Grandpa! They’ve got a swimming pool in here.”

The older girl said, “That’s not a swimming pool, it’s a fish tank.”

Now, Grandpa was enjoying the discussion too much to make an explanation just yet, so he let the girls talk.

The youngest said, “That’s not a fish tank. They don’t have any fish in it.”

The older girl said, “It is too a fish tank! Grandpa, let’s go buy some fish to put in the tank for them.”

Back and forth the discussion went. Then, the conversation stopped when a pastor got in the swimming pool/fish tank, and someone else joined him there. The girls watched with wide-eyed wonder as the man spoke for a while, and then he dunked the person who was in the water with him.

The youngest girl stared silently for a moment, then piped up, “Told you it was a swimming pool!”

While I have enjoyed laughing at the story of these two precious children, it does point out just how strange all of this must seem to some. And yet, this is what Jesus has asked us to do when we accept Him as our Lord and our Savior.

First of all, Jesus gave us an example by being baptized Himself. A man named John, who was called the Baptist, was preaching in the wilderness by the Jordan River. He preached a message of repentance and then encouraged people to be baptized as a sign that they would no longer live the old life of sin, but would live a new life of faith.

Baptism is a symbol that a person has repented of their sins, and that they are turning from their sinful ways. Jesus, however, had no sins from which to repent or turn. Let’s read about it in Matthew, chapter 3, beginning with verse 13.

Matthew 3:13-15

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

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When Jesus said that he wanted to be baptized to “fulfill all righteousness,” he was saying that his baptism would serve as a pattern for us to follow as we make the decision to follow Him.

Why is this important? Why does Jesus insist that we take this step in coming to Him?

Baptism symbolizes the death, burial, and resurrection of the repentant sinner – identifying with the death, burial, and resurrection that Jesus experienced on our behalf. Following His example, we have died to sin, been buried in a watery grave, and have been raised again to a new life in Jesus.

Many refer to the experience of coming to Jesus as being born again. That new birth is symbolized through baptism. The old is dead, the new is born – or reborn, as it were.

Baptism is an outward expression of what has happened inwardly. You don’t go to the altar to get married until something happens inside. The marriage ceremony is an expression of that which has already taken place inside the human heart. Baptism is an outward expression of that which has taken place inside your heart. You are married to Jesus.

You don’t get married because you’ve reached a certain age or because you want to be a part of a certain family, but because you’ve found the love of your life. Nothing else makes sense now that you have found that person.

That’s what baptism is. It is the ceremony that tells everyone that you love Jesus. You are leaving the old behind, and you identify yourself completely in His death, burial, and resurrection, because it is through those things that we are saved and made new.

This is not done in order that you can feel better about yourself, or feel justified, or so you can go to heaven. You do it because you have found someone Who loves you more than you could have ever imagined possible. His love is so intense that you have to have a response. It is a celebration of your relationship to God. An outward expression – an announcement to the world – of an inside commitment you have made to this person.

It is a symbol that you have found the thing that gives you hope! There is no longer despair. In fact, baptism dispels despair, guilt, and selfishness, because you are now surrendered to Christ, the Hope of the world and the love of your life.

This is how I want to live my life. It is a reminder that just as Jesus gave His all for us through the cross, so too, do we give our all to him by a full commitment.

Baptism symbolizes our death, burial, and resurrection in Christ. We give Him our all.

I remember a pastor from Texas who served as a summer missionary in East Malaysia when he was in college. While there, he attended a small church. At one of the church’s worship services, a teenage girl came forward to announce her decision to follow Christ and be baptized.

During the service, this young pastor noticed some worn-out luggage leaning against the wall of the church building. He asked the pastor about it.

The pastor pointed to the girl who had just been baptized and said, “Her father said that if she was baptized as a Christian she could never go home again. So she brought her luggage.”

This is the type of full surrender baptism symbolizes. It reminds us of our love and commitment to Jesus.

Just as my marriage ceremony is a constant reminder for me of my love and commitment to Gayle, so too, does my baptism serve as a constant reminder to me of my devotion to the One Who will take me home at last. I have charted my course with Him. That’s what baptism is all about.

If you have come to the place where you have recognized that you have a great need that you cannot supply for yourself, and if you have come to see that Jesus is the One who can meet that

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need, then the time has come to commit your life to Him. And if you have taken that step, now it is time to formalize your new identity in Christ through the step of baptism.

I promise you that, like the jailer in Philippi, your heart will be filled with a joy you have never known before as you make this step for your Savior.

Pat Summerall, the well-known sports announcer, overcame alcoholism and became a follower of Christ in his late sixties. He said this about water baptism: "I went down in the water, and when I came up, it was like a 40-pound weight had been lifted from me. I have a happier life, a healthy life, and a more positive feeling about life than ever before."

About prayer meetings and Bible studies, Summerall comments: "It's like an alcoholic looking for a drink. If he wants it bad enough, he can find it—no matter what. I'm like that when it comes to finding prayer services and Bible studies. No matter where I am working, I know that they're out there, and I can find them."

What about you? If you've seen your need, and you've met the Savior, and you've committed your life to Him, perhaps it is time to acknowledge that commitment through baptism.

Why not obey Jesus by taking this step? Why not experience the joy that comes through making a full surrender?