

Question of Questions by T DeWitt Talmage

"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30).

In a cell of the Philippian dungeon, dark, damp, chill, unilluminated save by the torch of some official who comes to see whether they are yet alive, are two Ministers of Jesus Christ; their feet fast in instruments of torture, their shoulders dripping from the strokes of leather thongs, their mouths hot with inflammation of thirst, their heads faint because they may not lie down. In another room of the same building is a man asleep on a comfortable couch. He is a supervisor, a paid officer of the government to look after that prison. I take him to have been a moral and an honorable man from the trust reposed in him. It is twelve o'clock at night. No sound in all the corridors and wards in that prison, save as some culprit turns over in his chains or there is the cough of a slow consumptive or some wanderer, far away from her father's house, cries out in her dream: "Mother! mother!"

At midnight, Crash! Go the prison walls, and the two Ministers of religion, Paul and Silas, are free. The supervisor of the jail, although he had been accustomed to the shadows hovering around the dungeon, is startled beyond all bounds; and flambeau in hand he rushes through between the falling walls, and throws himself down at the feet of his Apostolic prisoners, crying out in the memorable words of my text: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

There are hundreds and thousands with more or less earnestness asking the same question, and in this severe crisis of your soul I meet you with a message from the throne of God. There may be some who could surpass me in skillfulness of argument, there may be many who could drink from deeper fountains of knowledge and science, there may be many before whom, in some respects, I would be willing to bow as the inferior to the superior; but I yield to no one in this presence in a wish to have all the people saved; and with an all conquering desire that sometimes well nigh overcomes my utterance, I beg you to accept the eternal life of the Gospel. Lord, help us! Lord, help us now!

I proceed to characterize this question of the jail warden, and I characterize it in the first place as a courteous question. He did not come up to these men and say: "You outragers of the law, you miscreants, you vagabonds against society, you have upturned the whole city with excitement, and now you are trying to break down the walls of our prison, destroying government property; let me put on you these handcuffs and hobbles, or else get out beyond the confines of the city." He said no such thing. He addresses them with that one word, "Sirs," a synonym for lords - as much as to say: "I acknowledge the dignity of your mission. I acknowledge the honor of your manhood, and I am here to see what you can do for my soul." It was a courteous question.

But it is often the case when people begin to inquire about religion they become impertinent, and they denounce all Christians as hypocrites, and the Church of God as a cheat, and they criticize this and they denounce that and they complain of something else. Is that fair? Is that right? Is that courteous? Suppose I should come into an audience of lawyers and denounce them all as pettifoggers, or an audience of physicians and denounce them all as quacks? "Oh," you say, "that would not be fair." It would be just as fair as for you to denounce all Christians as hypocrites. There are pettifoggers among lawyers, and there are quacks among physicians, and there are hypocrites among Christians; but that is not the character of all lawyers or all physicians or all Christians. It was a courteous question, it was a gentlemanly question, it was a polite question, it was a deferential question. "Sirs! Sirs!"

I go further, and I characterize the question of the jail supervisor as a practical question. He did not ask why God let sin come into the world - he did not ask how the Christ about whom they were preaching could be God and man at the same time; he did not ask who Cain married; he did not ask who was Melchizedek; he did not ask the proportionate number of the finally saved and the finally lost. No; his question involved his present and his everlasting welfare. Was not that a practical question? Yet a great many people, when they begin to seek after religion, begin to find fault with the Bible, and they say, "If this is so, how can that be so?" And they complain of this and they complain of that and they go fishing after snapping turtles instead of fishing after the truth. They do not seem to be satisfied with the plain Gospel of the Son of God. Now, the question for you is not whether John Calvin or Arminius was right, not what will be the proportion of the finally saved and the finally lost, not who was Melchizedek, not who Cain married; the question for you is, "Where will I spend eternity?" It is a practical question.

I go further and I characterize this question of the jail supervisor as a question personal to himself. He may have had hundreds of friends; he is not asking about them. In that catastrophe of the failing prison some or those friends may have perished. He is not asking about them. He throws all the emphasis of his question upon the pronoun of the first person: "What shall I do to be saved?" When a man becomes a Christian, of course he is anxious to have everybody else saved. You are not a Christian if you are not anxious to have all the world saved; but until your own sins are pardoned, my brother, you must look at home. The difficulty is, we are so anxious about the lack of culture in our neighbor's yard that we let our own garden go to weeds - we are so anxious to get the people into the lifeboat of the Gospel that we ourselves drown in the wave. We cry, "Fire! fire!" because our neighbor's house is consuming; while ours is in a blaze. Now, let us blot out everything, let us obliterate all other considerations, let it be as though you were the only person present, the rest of the audience all gone. Your sin - is it pardoned? Your Heaven - is it secure?

I come up to the door of your soul with a message from the throne of God -about your pardon, your repentance, your enthronement, your exile, your eternal residence. This man of the text knew that there was coming an earthquake mightier than that which shook down the Philippian dungeon. The foundations of the earth shall give way. At one tremor of the world, all the modern cities will fall into the dust. Temples and towers that have stood a thousand years will fall as quickly as a child's block house. The waves of the sea will roll over the land, and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans will join hands above the Sierra Nevadas and the Alps and the Pyrenees. This man of the text was guarding not more against the falling of the prison than he was against the falling of a world.

I go further, and characterize this question of the jail supervisor as a question of incomparable importance. Perhaps he was anxious to have his salary raised as a supervisor; perhaps he wished to have better apartments; perhaps he was discussing some questions of prison reform, something about warmth, light, ventilation, medical treatment, discipline. Men are wonderfully alike, and I suppose he may have had a hundred questions to discuss; but all earthly questions are submerged, are bushed up, are annihilated by the one question: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And what question have you, my brother, comparable with that in importance?

Is it a business question? Do you not realize that you will soon have to go out of that store, that you will soon have to resign that partnership, that soon among all the millions of dollars' worth of goods that are sold in New York you will not have the handling of a yard of cloth or a pound of sugar or a pennyworth of anything, that soon, if a conflagration should start at Central Park and sweep everything to the Battery, it would not disturb you; that soon if every cashier should abscond, and every bank should suspend payment, and every insurance company should fail, it would not affect you? What are all the questions that stop this side the grave compared with the questions that reach beyond it? Are you making losses that are to be everlasting? Are you making purchases for eternity? Are you retailing for time, when you might be wholesaling for eternity? What question of the store is so broad at the base, and so altitudinous, and so overwhelming as the question, "What must I do to be saved?"

Or is it a domestic question? Is it something about father or mother or companion or son or daughter that you think is comparable with this question in importance? Do you not realize that by universal and inexorable law all these relations will be broken up? Your father will be gone, your mother will be gone, your companion will be gone, your child will be gone, you will be gone; and then this supernal question will begin to harvest its chief gains or deplore its worst losses, roll up into its mightiest magnitude or sweep its vastest circles - a question deciding whether you will live unending ages with God, the Blessed, or go into exile; whether you will take wing and fly, or chain and

drop; whether you will forever be built up or pulled down; whether for all the future you will be praising or blaspheming, chanting or groaning, living the life that always lives, or dying the death that always dies. Is there any question comparable with that?

What difference now does it make to Napoleon III whether he triumphed or surrendered at Sedan? Whether he lived at the Tuileries or at Chiselhurst? Whether he was emperor or exile? They laid him out in his coffin in the dress of a field marshal. Did that give him any better chance for the next world than if he had been laid out in a plain shroud? Soon to us what will be the difference whether in this world we rode or walked, were bowed to or maltreated, were applauded or hissed at, were welcomed in or kicked out; while, grasping the great future, and burning in splendor or grief, and over arching and under girding all time and all eternity, is the plain, simple, practical, thrilling, agonizing, overwhelming question: "What must I do to be saved?"

I go further, and I characterize this question of the jail supervisor as one pressed out by crushing misfortune. The penitentiary fallen, his business was gone. It was a financial loss. Besides that, the flight of a prisoner ordinarily in those times meant the death of the jailer. If the prison wars had stood solidly all that night, and the incarcerated had been quiet in the stocks, and the sunlight on the following morning had dropped on the calm pillow of the supervisor, would he have hurled the agitating words of my text into the ears of the Apostles? You know as well as I, it was the earthquake that roused his anxieties. And is it not the shaking of misfortune and trouble, and the crashing down of earthly hopes that has driven many of you to the Gospel? Your dress is not so bright as once. Why have you come to more subdued garb? You like the saffron and the crimson and the bright colors as well as ever; but you say: "Things that were in harmony with my feelings when I was young and bright and prosperous and gay would be a discord now." And so you have gathered up and plaited the darkness into your apparel.

There have been dark days in your house. It does not seem any more like home. You once wished the house might be quiet. It is too quiet. Others say they would not bring their loved ones back to this trouble some world if they could; but if you had the power, how soon those hushed voices would be back in the home circle; and it would be as it was in the Christmas or the Thanksgiving holiday so long gone by, never to come back with its hilarity's. Oh! It is the earthquake of domestic trouble that has started one half of you toward God. The grave is so cruel, so relentless, so devouring, that when our loved ones are swallowed up by it, we must have some one to whom we can take our torn and bleeding hearts.

It needs a balsam better than ever exuded from any earthly tree to stop the sharpness of the pang. It is pleasant at such times to have friends come in and try to break up the loneliness; but Jesus only can take the frenzied spirit on

His bosom and hush it with the lullaby of Heaven. Alas the heavy grave stone will never be lifted from your heart until Jesus lifts it. Has it not been the loss of your friends, has it not been the crushing down of your estate, has it not been the earthquake of misfortune that led you to ask the question spelled in tears and heart breaks, the impassioned outcry: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

I take one step further, and I characterize this question of the jail supervisor as an urgent, hasty, immediate question that demanded an immediate answer. It was a question put on the run. You can see by the torch the jailer holds in his hand the startled and anxious look. He had no time to prepare himself in especial apparel, no time to comb his hair, no time to fix himself up. He must have that question answered before the earthquake has stopped rocking, or never perhaps have it answered at all. Is that the way you propound the question of your salvation, or do you drawl it out as much as to say: "Any time within fifteen years I would like to have it answered"? Do you know that thousands of souls have been ruined because they did not ask the question in time? If the door of the lost world could be opened, and one word of warning could come forth, and they could utter only one word of warning, that word would come sounding up like the howl of the everlasting storm: "Now!" I open the gate of those there incarcerated. I find some of the young are there. What is their history? Now did they lose their souls? By procrastinating to old age, or to mid-life; but the rail train shot from the track and in an instant they were gone; or they slipped on the icy pavement and the skull was fractured; or the typhoid fever came down and drove them in delirium out of life. There are some of the middle aged who have lost their souls. What was their history? They adjourned religion until they got more time, until they got their worldly affairs arranged, until they made a competency. In the attempt to win the world they lost their soul. All their government securities, all their certificates of stock, all their warehouses, all their bonds, all their daybooks and ledgers, all their worldly accumulations are of no service to them now. There are some of the aged who lost their souls - through what cause? Adjourning religion until their hearts were so hard when they tried to repent they could not repent, and when they tried to pray they could not pray; and they went tottering on leaning heavier and heavier on their staff until it broke, and they fell headlong into outer darkness.

Are you proposing the question of the text with an urgency such as this man of the text employed, or are you adjourning it to the last hour? Adjourning it to the last hour, are you? I suppose that out of the one hundred death bed repentances, ninety nine amount to nothing. Of the large number of people in this Bible who are represented as dying, how many of them are represented as repenting successfully in the last hour? Fifty? No. Thirty? No. Twenty? No. Ten? No. Five? No. Two? No. One? Just one. Only one. As much as to say: "it is possible that a man may repent in the last hour of his life, but it is improbable; it is a hundred chances to one against him."

Have you ever seen a man after living a life of sin and idleness worrying to repent in the last hour? I have seen that spectacle. If you had ever seen it you would not try to repeat it. Why, it is most inopportune. There is the physician standing with the medicine, and here is the lawyer standing with the half written will; and the bells of eternity are tolling at the passage of the soul from the body; and all the past is surging upon us, and all the future; and angels are flying through the room, and devils are plotting for the overthrow. The man is a fool who adjourns repentance until the death hour.

My text asks the question, but does not answer it. That comes on in the next verse, and strict rules of sermonizing would say that must come in some other sermon. But what are rules of sermonizing to me when I am after souls immortal? Wait until another time! I might be dead before that time, and many of you I confront only once.

After a friend in Philadelphia died, his children gave his Church Bible to me, and I read it with much interest. I saw in the margin written in lead pencil; "Mr. Talmage said this morning that the most useless thing in God's universe is that any sinner should perish." I did not remember saying it; but it is true, and I say it now, whether I said it then or not - the most useless thing in all God's universe is that any sinner should perish. Twelve gates wide open. Have you not heard how Christ bore our sorrows, and how sympathetic He is with all our woes? Have you not heard how that with all the sorrows of heart and all the agonies of hell upon him He cried: "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do!" By His feet blistered of the mountain way - by His back whipped until the skin came off; by His death couch of your spikes, two for the hands and two for the feet; by His sepulcher, in which for the first time for thirty three years the cruel world let him alone; and by the heavens from which he this morning bends in compassion, offering pardon and peace and life eternal to all your souls. I beg of you put down your all at his feet.

I saw one hanging on a tree,
In agony and blood,
Who put His languid eyes on me,
As near His Cross I stood,
Oh, never till my latest breath,
Will I forget that look;
It seemed to charge me with His death,
Though not a word He spoke.

In the troubled times of Scotland, Sir John Cochrane was condemned to death by the king. The death warrant was on the way. Sir John Cochrane was bidding farewell to his daughter Crizelle at the Prison door, He said: "Farewell, my darling child! I must die." His daughter said: "No father, you shall not die." "But," he said, "the king is against me, and the law is after me, and the death

warrant is on its way, and I must die; do not deceive yourself, my dear child." The daughter said: "Father, you shall not die," as she left the prison gate. At night, on the moors of Scotland, a disguised wayfarer stood waiting for the horseman carrying the mail bags containing the death warrant. The disguised wayfarer, as the horse came by, clutched the bridle and shouted to the rider - to the man who carried the mail-bags: "Dismount!" He felt for his arms, and was about to shoot, but the wayfarer jerked him from his saddle and he fell flat.

The wayfarer picked up the mail bags, put them on his shoulder and vanished in the darkness - and fourteen days were thus gained for the prisoner's life, during which the father confessor was pleading for the pardon of Sir John Cochrane. The second time the death warrant is on its way. The disguised wayfarer comes along, and asks for a little bread and a little wine, starts on across the moors, and they say: "Poor man, to have to go out such a stormy night - it is dark and you will lose yourself on the moors." "Oh, no," he says: "I will not." He trudged on and stopped amid the brambles and waited for the horseman to come carrying the mail bags containing the death warrant of Sir John Cochrane. The mail carrier spurred on his steed, for he was fearful because of what had occurred on the former journey, spurred on his steed; when suddenly through the storm and through the darkness there was a flash of firearms, and the horse became unmanageable; and as the mail carrier discharged his pistol in response, the horse flung him, and the disguised wayfarer put his foot on the breast of the overthrown rider, and said: "Surrender now!" The mail carrier surrendered his arms, and the disguised wayfarer put upon his shoulders the mail bags, leaped upon the horse, and sped away into the darkness, gaining fourteen more days for the poor prisoner, Sir John Cochrane; and before the fourteen days had expired pardon had come from the king. The door of the prison swung open, and Sir John Cochrane was free. One day when he was standing amid his friends, they congratulating him, the disguised wayfarer appeared at the gate, and he said: "Admit him right away," The disguised wayfarer came in and said: "Here are two letters; read them, sir, and cast them into the fire." Sir John Cochrane read them. They were his two death warrants, and he threw them into the fire. Then said Sir John Cochrane: "To whom am I indebted? Who is the poor wayfarer that saved my life? Who is it?" And the wayfarer pulled aside and pulled off the jerkin and the cloak and the hat, and lo! it was Grizelle, the daughter of Sir John Cochrane. "Gracious Heaven!" he cried, "my child, my Savior, my own Grizelle!"

But a more thrilling story. The death warrant had come forth from the King of Heaven and earth. The death warrant read: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." The death warrant coming on the black horse of eternal night. We must die! We must die! But breasting the storm and putting out through the darkness was a disguised wayfarer who gripped by the bridle the on coming doom and hung it back, and put His wounded and bleeding foot on the overthrown rider. Mean while pardon flashed from the throne, and, "Go free! Open the gate! Strike off the chain! Go free!" And today your liberated soul stands in the presence of

the disguised wayfarer, and as he pulls off the disguise of his earthly humiliation and the disguise of his thorns and the disguise of the seamless robe, you find he is bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh, your Brother, your Christ, your pardon, your eternal life. Let all earth and Heaven break forth in vociferation! Victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

A guilty, weak, and helpless worm,
On Thy kind arms I fall;
Be Thou my strength and righteousness,
My Jesus and my all.