

ANXIOUS PEOPLE... WHO WANTED TO KNOW

Luke 12:16-20; Luke 18:18; Acts 2:36-37; Acts 9:6; Acts 16:32-34

It was my privilege for four exciting years to be the national evangelist of the South African Baptist Church. I shall always be indebted to the people who bestowed upon me that inestimable honor. I had completed my training, pastored a church for eight years, and believed I was competent to answer the challenge. I quickly discovered in the new country that I had much to learn—in fact, I knew nothing. During my stay in that wonderful country, I met distinguished people and explored strange places. My two books *Black Radiance* and *Silent Challenge* explained what I discovered. I also learned to appreciate the viewpoints of others who did not share my faith.

Within a Jewish synagogue in Pretoria a very fine gentleman explained his faith. He informed me that I was a sinner who needed forgiveness. When I asked how this could be accomplished, he pointed to an inscription on the wall and said, "You must keep the ten commandments."

At the Feast of Ramadan in Durban, I was given a place of honor. My gracious host explained that I was a sinner, and to be forgiven I would be required to do certain things. Pointing to five pillars that supported the roof of the building, he said: "The pillars represent the five great laws of the Moslem faith: (1) each day you must say 'The Lord our God is one God, and Mohammed is his prophet'; (2) daily, at the call to prayer, wherever you might be, you must kneel to pray, facing the east; (3) two and a half percent of your income must be given to the poor; (4) you must observe the feast of Ramadan; (5) once in your lifetime, should it become possible, you should visit Mecca."

A Hindu priest took my wife and me into one of his temples. His teeth had been filed downward to points; they resembled bars guarding a cave. He was very courteous and proud of his appearance. He spoke

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in broken English and explained the many gods that stood on pedestals around the building. He lifted gray ashes from a bowl and gave them to me, explaining I was a sinner and needed forgiveness. If I rubbed the ashes into my forehead, the god would be pleased and pardon would be assured. He gave red ashes to my wife so that she also might be forgiven.

During my four years, in varying circumstances, I was told that unless I did something, my sins would remain. Luke would have appreciated those experiences, for on five different occasions he wrote of people who asked about salvation and said, "What shall I do'?"

The Rich Fool... and His Mistake

And he [Jesus] spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits'? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? (Luke 12:16-20)

This was only a parable, but it supplied a portrait of people who could be seen daily. A wealthy farmer was delighted with the size and quality

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of his crops; they probably surpassed anything known during his experience. His eyes narrowed; his barns were already well filled, and it would be regrettable if any of the new harvest were lost. Yes, he would demolish the old structures and erect barns capable of holding everything. Then he could say to himself, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry." Poor fellow. He did not live long enough to see the old barns being destroyed.

Jesus continued: "So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (v. 21). There was nothing sinful about having a large harvest; neither was it wrong to plan larger barns. Yet it was foolish to exclude God from his business interests. He was not rich toward God and consequently, died a pauper. Many poor people in his area, especially widows, would have been grateful had they been offered a small share of the farmer's surplus. He would not have missed anything had he planned to build fewer barns and fed some of his hungry

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neighbors. Even his workmen would have been delighted to receive extra wages. The landowner was foolish. He spoke of my fruits, my barns, my goods, my soul. He possessed much but enjoyed little. Had he been a wiser man, he would have spoken of my God, my Helper, my blessing, my destiny. He resembled a wealthy sailor whose ship sank within sight of home.

The Young Ruler.., and His Money

And a certain ruler asked him, saying, Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? (Luke 18:18)

He was different from his colleagues; the young ruler was virtuous, considerate, sincere, and popular. Known for his outstanding charm, he was recognized everywhere. The young man was wise enough to know his money could not buy everything. When he approached Jesus to ask about eternal life, a new era was opening before him. He had become aware of an emptiness within his soul; something was missing! He had possibly heard the new Rabbi and recognized the sincerity of the One who spoke about the pure in heart and how they would see God. Calm, dignified, majestic, Jesus was different from other public speakers. He seemed to be a mystic who understood the things of God and yet was so approachable that children climbed upon His knees.

He used simple words, but His eloquence captivated multitudes of listeners. He spoke of eternal life, and this mystified the young ruler. It would be wonderful to acquire immortality. "Master, you speak about eternal life. What must I do to inherit it?" Evidently, he already knew he did not have it. The Teacher apparently had no money, but He possessed something special. Where did Jesus obtain His serenity? "Master, tell me, so that I also might have eternal life. I have kept the commandments, but something is lacking in my soul."

"Now when Jesus heard these things, he said unto him, Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me" (v. 22).

The questioner was stunned. He imagined what life would be if he joined this band of preachers who had no money, no home, no lavish lifestyle. The teacher seemed to be saying, "Don't worry, You will still have Me." Suddenly the man's question changed. He came asking what he should do to inherit eternal life; he departed asking, "How can I avoid becoming poor?" The price to be paid for the new life was so overwhelming, he forgot to ask what would happen if he rejected the

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Savior's advice. "He was very sorrowful: for he was very rich" (v. 23). Was the ruler ever haunted by the memory of his unwise decision?

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Many people know how to obtain eternal life, but like the ruler they refuse to follow Christ. Jesus said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you (Matt. 6:33). The young man would have endorsed that statement had the word first been omitted.

The Jews ... and Their Memories

Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ. Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? (Acts 2:36-37)

Jerusalem was in an uproar! The centers visited by tourists and pilgrims were deserted; people were elsewhere. Strange fishermen from Galilee were preaching in the streets. They claimed to have proof that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead to become a Prince and a Savior. Crowds of listeners were being influenced by these open-air speakers, but even more disconcerting was the magnetism of a man called Simon Peter. He was an uneducated fisherman from Capernaum who spoke with authority. He not only claimed that Jesus was the expected Messiah, he proved the fact with numerous quotations from the sacred Scriptures. It was bewildering how an untrained man could be so eloquent. The listeners were restless. If they had killed the Son of God, their future was ominous.

The people needed to know what they were to do. The answer to the question was clear and concise: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (v. 38). "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls" (v. 41). Blessed are they who, knowing what should be done, do it.

The Blind Persecutor... and His Mission

And he [Saul of Tarsus] trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? (Acts 9:6)

Poor Saul; just when his ultimate triumph seemed assured, victory

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eluded his grasp. The invincible had been vanquished. "And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man" (v. 7). It seemed to them that a spirit had attacked their leader; he had been confronted by an adversary against whom there was no protection. Within the city of Damascus, Christians feared the approach of the persecutor; brothers and sisters in the faith had been imprisoned and murdered, and now the relentless foe was intent on resuming his diabolical efforts. They did not know that the risen Christ had gone to meet the aggressor. "And as he [Saul] journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks" (vv. 3-5). This confrontation prompted the question from the trembling man, What wilt thou have me to do? "And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do" (v. 6b).

During the following days Saul had plenty of time to reflect upon his behavior, as he sat blind in his apartment wondering if he would ever see again. Then suddenly he heard a knock on the door and a cheerful voice said, "Brother Saul." Saul listened, learned, and loved, and from those early beginnings his ministry became worldwide. He

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became the missionary to the Gentiles, and that was exactly what God wanted him to be. All converts should seek the counsel of older Christians. A man without a church becomes a hermit who preaches to a congregation of one.

The Philippian Jailer.., and His Ministry

And they [Paul and Silas] spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to 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, straightway. And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing in God with all his house. (Acts 16:32-34)

At first the jailer thought he was having a nightmare. His bed was rolling like a ship in a storm; the noise of swinging doors and the sound of falling masonry sounded like thunder. Then suddenly, he awakened to realize this was not a dream but a devastating earthquake. The world was falling apart!

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"And the keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled. But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here. Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and 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 Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (vv. 27-31). That was his most memorable night. At first he feared the prisoners had escaped, but then they were forgotten as the jailer escaped from bondage of a different type. If the prisoners disappeared, who cared? The official was too busy enjoying his own freedom. It was interesting that he asked about salvation; he was not a theological student, but he appreciated reality. Paul and Silas possessed something he did not. When he received the answer he needed, he acted. He brought them out. He washed their wounds. He was baptized. He fed them, and he rejoiced with all his family.

Within the early church every meal was a love feast when bread was broken to commemorate the sacrifice of Christ. The new convert grew quickly. He was baptized, enjoyed his first communion, and learned how Christ could fill his soul with intense joy—all in a matter of hours. His experience contrasted with that of Paul. Midday became midnight when outside of Damascus, the persecutor became blind. At midnight it became noon when the Light of the World shone into the jailer's darkened soul. He asked how he could be saved, and then transformed his home into a sanctuary where his family became an attentive, worshipping congregation. What can we do for Christ?

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