

“RELEASED FROM BONDAGE: PAUL AND SILAS IN PRISON”

ACTS 16:16-34

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Acts 16:16-40. ¹⁶ One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." ¹⁸ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

¹⁹ But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. ²⁰ When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴ Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴ He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

A. Introduction

The story of the imprisonment of Paul and Silas is one of the most vivid stories in Acts. It depicts the continued power of Christ—operating in and through Paul and Silas—triumphing over magic, overcoming resistance, increasing the number of believers, and, most importantly, liberating people from bondage.

The story provides a kaleidoscope of images: an earthquake, demon possession, hucksters pandering a fortune-teller, rough characters beating up people, greedy merchants and magistrates, riotous crowds, bludgeoned bodies, and dank prison cells.

The story provides an impressionistic picture of God's liberating power. Trying to sort it out in a literal fashion may obscure some of the deeper theological and spiritual realities. We can read the story literally, but we'll gain much more if we interpret it metaphorically.

B. Slave girl with a python spirit (16-18)

1. Bondage (spiritual and physical)

The story begins with Paul and Silas going to a place of prayer for Jews outside the city of Philippi. As they walk along, they're met by a slave girl, who is described as having a "python spirit" (*pneuma puthōna*), which the NRSV translates as "a spirit of divination" (16).

The girl speaks in a trance: “she was inspired, like the priestess at Delphi, by Apollo, who was symbolized by a snake (the python); like the Delphi priestess she ‘gave oracles’ (in a trance or in ecstasy).”¹

The slave girl is a piece of property, not a person. She is used by owners. Because she can tell fortunes, speak in a trance, and entertain people, her owners made lots of money. These were rough men. They’re able to subdue Paul and Silas and drag them into the marketplace. Imagine what the slave girl went through.

Here is a young girl, demon possessed—in the grip of mental illness, or schizophrenia, or something worse—in bondage to a demon and in bondage to exploitative merchants. Her bondage is spiritual and physical.

2. Freedom (inner)

And what does she do? When she sees Paul and Silas, she follows them around. And she shouts out: “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaims to you a way for salvation.”

Ironically, the slave girl recognizes that there is a type of slavery that is good—slavery to God. Paul talks about himself being profoundly free, yet a slave to God. In any case, the slave girl followed Paul and Silas for many days and this became very irritating to Paul.

Why do you suppose she followed Paul and Silas around? We’re not told, but perhaps she was reaching out to people she thought just might be able to help her.

Sometimes you and I play the roll of Paul and Silas. Sometimes we are hounded by irritating people, who think we might be able to give them some kind of “salvation”. But where is salvation to be found? In Paul and Silas? In you and I?

What does Paul do? He is thoroughly annoyed by girl. He turns to her and *says to the spirit*: “I order you in the name of Jesus to come out of her.” And it came out!

Salvation is in Jesus, not Paul (or you and I). She is released from the python spirit. She is free. No longer a soothsayer. Nothing more is said about the girl. What happened to her is unknown.

Very rapidly, Luke turns his attention to the effect of this deliverance.

C. The owners (19-22)

He turns his attention to the owners. There should’ve been rejoicing. But the owners are outraged. Paul’s act of mercy robs the girl of her ability to tell fortunes and cheats the owners out of their profit.

1. Don’t threaten profits

¹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 221.

In this story, profits are threatened by religion. Paul and Silas' religion have threatened the economics of Philippi.

The outrage is as understandable today as it was then. Do anything threaten profit and you must be wrong from the start! National leaders and corporate executives use the same logic to resist doing anything about climate change. Don't threaten business! The same is true for our health care and immigration problems. Don't threaten business!

The slave-girl's owners are very concerned about their profit. So they make a citizen's arrest and haul Paul and Silas before the magistrates.

The owners—perhaps a small syndicate—adopt a tactic repeated countless times in history. They don't come right out and say their financial self-interests are threatened. What do the owners tell the magistrates?²

"These men are disturbing our city [*an appeal to nationalism*]; they are Jews [*an appeal to racial prejudice*]²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe [*an appeal to old time religion*]." (Acts 16:20-21; NRSV).

The owners of the slave girl never mention their loss of profits. They veil their interests in the language *nation*, *race*, and *tradition* ... these three... and they are used to support immoral economics.³

2. Violence to protect profits

Then what happens? Violence is used to protect profits. Verse 22 says: "The crowd joined in attacking them." The crowd was swayed. It's *democracy in action*. The crowd "falls into line behind the business leaders of the town" and they attack Paul and Silas.⁴

There is no trial. Their guilt is assumed. The magistrates join in. Paul and Silas' clothes are stripped off and they are beaten with rods (2 Cor 11:25). Then they are thrown in jail, to the innermost cell and shackled in stocks bolted to the wall.

What could be worse? It is all the more upsetting, because it is undeserved. Paul and Silas had acted mercifully and, in response, they are treated without mercy. They liberated the girl from bondage, and now they are put in bondage.

Or are they?

D. Paul and Silas (23-24)

1. Bondage (physical)

The way Luke tells the story, the way he describes in details about how Paul and Silas are beaten, shackled, locked up, and placed in the innermost cell, suggests that

² William Willimon, *Acts*, 139.

³ William Willimon, *Acts*, 139.

⁴ William Willimon, *Acts* 139.

there has never been a greater prison experience than this. Nether Houdini nor Chris Angel could have escaped.

And yet, we get the impression that neither Paul nor Silas feel they have lost any freedom whatsoever.

2. Freedom (inner)

What are Paul and Silas doing? They are praying and signing hymns. And they are preaching to the prisoners. This is not the attitude of prisoners. No. They are inwardly free, even though they physically in shackles.

Sometimes God locks us up. You might be in a mental prison, in a bad marriage, bound by a difficult and bone crushing job. We have all had prison experiences.

During these times, we wonder where God is and why God allowed it to happen to us. We wonder how we got there and when will it end. We wonder why, if God really loves us, these things happen to us. Well, I don't have the answers for you, but there is encouragement in the passage.

Did Paul and Silas grown and complain, feel sorrow for themselves, curse God, their parents, or their employers? No. The story says that “about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and signing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (16:25).

Here we see the Christian ideals of praying and rejoicing in all circumstances:

Phil 4:4. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

1 Thes 5:16-17. Rejoice always; pray without ceasing.

Rom 5:3. We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance.

Luke wants us to see that no matter what circumstances, God is with you. And you have the capacity for inner freedom to rejoice and pray.

During World War II, Victor Frankl, the author of the book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, was imprisoned by the Nazis because he was Jewish. His wife, children, and parents were all killed by the Nazis. At one point, the prison guards cut his wedding band off his finger. Frankl said to himself,

"You can take away my wife and children, you can strip me of my clothes and my freedom, but there is one thing no person can ever take away from me—and that is my freedom to choose how I will react to what happens to me."

To survive the prison experiences of life requires that you know you have the inner freedom to choose how you will react to your circumstances. Paul wrote:

Phil 4:11-13. ... for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹² I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of

having plenty and of being in need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (NRSV)

All freedom has a “from” something “to” something else. Inner freedom is freedom from being driven or compelled, and to having choice and responsibility. Paul and Silas chose to be happy in their circumstances.⁵ They were in an inescapable prison, yet they were free. They were free to choose their attitude in any given circumstance.

They were inwardly free, so when the door flung open, they didn’t need to move, because they were already free (inwardly).

E. The jailer (25-34)

Next, without a warning, an earthquake strikes. The prison shakes, the doors fly open. Everyone’s shackles fall off. Paul and Silas, not to mention all the other prisoners, are free to leave. But now, the story reveals a contrast. Ironically, it is not Paul and Silas, but the jailer, who is in bondage.

1. Bondage (inner)

Look at the jailer. It took an earthquake to wake him up. And by the time he stumbles in the dark to get to the jail, he sees the doors are open. He assumes the worst—all the prisoners have escaped. And he is horrified.

Why is the jailer horrified? He knows that a guard who lets a prisoner escape will have to serve that person’s punishment.⁶ The jailer is so overcome with fear that he starts to commit suicide. Verse 27 says, “he drew his sword and was about to kill himself.”

The jailer feels so constrained by fear, so imprisoned by his own feelings, that the only way out is suicide. He thinks killing himself is the only way to liberate himself from the punishment coming his way. That’s bondage!

When he is about to kill himself, out of the dark Paul shouts out: “Don’t do it. We’re all here, just singing and praying.” The jailer says, “But you are free to escape.” And Paul says, “No, we’re already free, but you are in bondage.”⁷

At this point in the story, we can see that “everyone who at first appeared to be free—the girl’s owners, the judges, the jailer—is a slave. And everyone who first appeared to be enslaved—the girl, Paul, and Silas—is free.”⁸

2. Freedom (inner)

The jailer wants inner freedom—not to be compelled to commit suicide—so he asks: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (16:30). The word for “saved” in the Greek is *sōdzō*, which can be translated in a variety of ways, including rescued,

⁵ Victor Frankl, *The Unconscious God*, 52.

⁶ Cf. Acts 12:19; 27:24; Chalmer Faw, *Acts*, 186.

⁷ William Willimon, *Acts* 140.

⁸ William Willimon, *Acts*, 140.

liberated, healed, and saved. In this context, *sōdzō* should be translated “freed,” not saved.” The jailer is asking, “What must I do to be free?”

Paul answer is this: “Believe in Jesus and you will be free, you and your household” (Acts 16:31). There is a force beyond any that the jailor has encountered and that force can liberate him. The same Power liberated Paul on the Damascus road and the same Power that orchestrated the earthquake.

How do we know that the jailer was liberated? We know by the actions he took.

1. He is no longer in fear
2. He loves his “enemies” in that he washes the wounds of Paul and Silas
3. He and his whole household are baptized in the middle of the night
4. He brings the food of fellowship to Paul and Silas
5. He rejoices
6. And the text says, “He had become a believer in God.”

The jailer is no longer driven by impulse to kill himself; rather, he freely chooses what he is going to be. God empowers, but it is he who chooses freely, and not compulsively. That is one very important dimension of salvation.

E. Reflections

The story is about salvation. In this case, it is liberation that is emphasized. Each of us has experienced compulsions, constraints, and prison experiences of the mind, soul, and body. This story gives us courage to draw on God’s power to gain inner freedom.

Inner freedom is freedom from being driven or compelled and freedom toward choice and responsibility. And, when all of our apparent freedoms have been taken from us, the inner freedom to choose our attitude and choose the way we interpret our situation demonstrates that we have the power to transcend our limitations. This is the power of Christ’s liberation.

Finally, let me conclude with a paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 10:13:

No bondage has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful. God will not let you be in bondage beyond your strength, but with the bondage God will provide the way out that you may be able to endure it.