

Breaking Free

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Acts 16:16-34

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 in 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.

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REFLECT & DISCUSS

1. Read the passage slowly. Then take a deep breath and read it again. What word, phrase, or image stands out to you?
2. Paul got annoyed with the young woman following him around, perhaps because she was proclaiming something about him he didn't want to endorse: that he was a slave of Zeus (ie, "the most high God" in the local pantheon) who provided a way of health and prosperity (ie, "salvation").
 - a. Have you ever been annoyed by those who mistake the way you understand or practice your faith? How do you attempt to correct or clarify the mistaken perception, if at all?
 - b. Are there versions of Christianity or Christian beliefs that others might assume about you that are not what you want to endorse? What do you do about that?
3. The young woman might well have been trafficked and enslaved, making a profit for her owners by fortune-telling. Even if sparked by annoyance, Paul frees her from this exploitative arrangement.
 - a. How is this freedom from exploitation in line with the story and way of Jesus?
 - b. This passage takes place in Philippi, a Roman colony filled with retired Roman military personnel. The owners retaliate against Paul using a charge that is both religious and political: Paul is "Jewish" and therefore "anti-Roman". He is construed as a threat to the Roman religious and political order, and thus deserving of punishment and imprisonment. Christianity is the dominant religion in the US. Are people, ideas, or practices labeled "anti-Christian" in similar ways? How so?
4. Paul and Silas are beaten and imprisoned. This would happen time and again for Paul in Acts, and happens time and again throughout history for Christians advocating freedom and dignity for suffering people. What examples of imprisoned Christians are you aware of, and who were they advocating for?
5. Paul and Silas don't run off when the doors fling open. They stick around for the guard who would have been punished for their escape, and the guard is converted by their care. How does this reflect the story of Jesus and the presence of Christ?
6. How are Paul and Silas an example for Christians today?