

Breaking Chains

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Acts 16: 16-34

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As Stasia shared her story of how her life was transformed as she put her entire trust in God, we will now go back 2,000 years and listen in on another story of holy insight and healing.

Acts 16 brings us a wonderfully detailed story of spiritual fever, complete with an exorcism, outrage, mob scenes, courtroom drama, liberation and celebration. Paul stands at the center of the action, and the cast of characters are colorful indeed. Before we share the story in dramatic form, let me introduce you to the characters. Each has an important role that intensifies the drama and expands the meaning.

1. First, meet Paul (Jack) – the apostle of Jesus who was transformed...converted from Jesus hater and Christian persecutor the one who did more to spread the Christian story than anyone up to that point. Paul was a deeply religious Jew educated in Greek culture and born a Roman citizen. Following his conversion, he became a leader in establishing a worldwide church within 40 years of Jesus death, and by example showed Christians how to face persecution with courage and faith. At the time of our story, he is claiming thousands of converts – both Jew and Greek, Slave and Free, Male and Female.
2. Silas (Elizabeth) – traveled with Paul in his second missionary journey. His Roman heritage and citizenship proved to be very useful for the expansion of the church at large. He had been a synagogue attendant in Jerusalem who preserved the scrolls and Scriptures. He was eventually appointed by the Jerusalem Council with three others to write and deliver the landmark decision to all the outlying churches regarding ethical guidelines for Gentile converts.
3. Slave-girl (Molly) – unnamed in this story, she was owned by others who recognized her special spiritual powers. She was a psychic reader, could predict the future; was able to see deeply into the realities that the rest of us may miss. Scholars tell us that people would come to these people, also called “mantics” to ask them questions which they would answer while in a trance – speaking in what was interpreted as “the spirit of the snake-god.” Her powers were tied to the Greek god Apollo. She would have been accepted in Greek society as a more or less ordinary member of society serving a useful function for people in that culture. Still, she was “owned” by others who used her for their own lucrative purposes.
4. Other characters include the owner of the Slave Girl, the magistrate/judge who decides the sentence upon Paul and Silas, and the Jailer ~ who is responsible for keeping close watch over the prisoners assigned to him.

Let us listen and live in this episode in the life of the early church as told by Luke in his book of the Acts of the Apostles chapter 16, verses 16-34.

Script (based on *The Message*)

Narrator: Paul and Silas, and the entourage that accompanied these first Christian evangelists were feeling pretty good about how things were going on their second missionary journey...

...the Jewish –Christian community was growing rapidly as they traveled, sharing the story of Jesus and the pathway to a radical new way of living that brought astounding peace and purpose, courage and joy...a salvation that literally changed them from the inside out. So many were being baptized!

As they traveled, Paul and Silas followed their routine of going to "the place of prayer," perhaps down by the river where they had first met Lydia, who had been baptized earlier. Perhaps they were seeking out the local synagogue. We can believe that they kept to their practice of prayer and teaching, preaching the good news of Jesus Christ, whether or not things were going well.

This day, as the story goes, as they were on their way, a slave-girl ran into them. She was a psychic and, with her fortunetelling, made a lot of money for the people who owned her. She started following Paul and Silas around, calling everyone's attention to them... evidently agitating and making people very uncomfortable.

Paul: This girl has been following us for days. She has been so intrusive, shouting and interrupting our preaching!

Silas: It's a terrible situation. She seems so distressed and agitated! Yet she seems to know who we are!

Slave Girl: 1. You are servants of the Most High God! You are showing us a new way to be saved! These men are the servants of the Most High God, who are showing you the way to be saved! 3. These men are the servants of the Most High God, who are showing you the way to be saved!

Paul: (To Silas) I must do something, she is so annoying! In the name of Jesus Christ, I release you! Spirit of restlessness, I command you to come out of her!

Owner: Look at that. The spirit is gone out of her. How can she make money for us now? These men have taken away our livelihood! Seize them and take them to the authorities.

Magistrate: These men are Religious fanatics, preaching blasphemy! They are creating an uproar in the city with unlawful customs. We can't have that. Strip them and beat them.

Narrator: After beating them black-and-blue, they threw them into jail, telling the jailer to put them under heavy guard so there would be no chance of escape. He did just that—threw them into the maximum security cell in the jail and clamped leg irons on them.

Magistrate: (to Jailer) Now... guard them carefully.

Narrator: Along about midnight, Paul and Silas were at prayer and singing a robust hymn to God. The other prisoners couldn't believe their ears, how could they be singing in this dark and daunting and diseased place?

(Laurie begins to play *Amazing Grace* slowly, as Elizabeth and Jack begin singing. Choir and congregation join in. Gets louder. Then there is a drum roll as the third verse is sung, and the piano begins to create chaotic melodies that grows and everybody trembles. The drum roll and piano ends with a loud crash, and Paul and Silas hug through the chaos, dust themselves off and stand).

Narrator: Startled from sleep, the jailer saw all the doors swinging loose on their hinges. Assuming that all the prisoners had escaped, he pulled out his sword and was about to kill himself, figuring he was as good as dead anyway, when Paul stopped him:

Paul: Don't harm yourself, we are all still here! Nobody's run away!

Jailer: Sirs, why did you not run away and save yourselves when you had the chance? Why did you save my life? What must *I* do to be saved, to really live?

Silas: Put your entire trust in the Lord Jesus. Then you'll live as you were meant to live—and everyone in your house included! Come walk with us and talk....

Narrator: They went on to spell out in detail the story of Jesus—his entire family got in on this part. They never did get to bed that night. The jailer made them feel at home, dressed their wounds, and then—he couldn't wait till morning!—was baptized, he and everyone in his family. There in his home, he had food set out for a festive meal. It was a night to remember: He and his entire family had put their trust in God; everyone in the house was in on the celebration.

Reflection

Certain questions arise for me from this story.

1. Why did Paul exorcise the seemingly “friendly” spirit from the slave-girl? And why did he not save her from her possessors, her owners? Paul was “annoyed” like any of us get when someone is so persistent and zealous and pushy with their views and needs... and when they invade your space with the discomfort of them. Still, this impulsive response to just “zap the spirit out of her,” as well as using a holy gift to do so, leaves me unsettled. How many times have I given \$5 or \$10 to someone who just keeps pressing me in their need, rather than spending the time it takes to really help them make a far more significant change in their life? Paul “exorcised the agitated spirit” out of the young enslaved girl simply to rid himself of her annoyance. Was she not also important to God? The fact that Luke, the narrator, felt it important to record means that we are intended to make meaning from it. What is that meaning today?
2. As your pastor, I continually have to make choices about how I spend my time, and who with, and the degree of need that overlay's each decision. Sometimes the choice is clear and obvious. And sometimes I must rely on why my heart tells me... even if I know it means leaving the 99 for the one that is most in need. Other times I must choose the larger and greatest good, even knowing that I am leaving some important lives and duties untended. Sometimes my heart tells me to go in one direction, knowing that I may be misunderstood in my decision. And I have to place my entire trust in God's hands that I

will eventually be understood, or even forgiven. And sometimes, I must choose to tend to myself even when the needs around are still clamoring. I don't like leaving that poor young enslaved woman on the floor to be treated like a piece of property. But God's knowledge is also greater than my own. And perhaps another's saving grace is due to far more than my own perceptions of what I can contribute. So, when I must make a quick decision as to where my heart's energy will go I have to place my trust that God will continue to guide my best choices, and will be in the hearts of those who are also under God's care. I must remember that I cannot fix, solve, or tend to everyone. But I can love.

3. But certainly, this is a universal problem. How do we all make these decisions in our lives? We all have to sometimes choose between what we perceive is the greatest need facing us, or the greater outcome yet to come. Yet I cannot stop thinking about this poor young girl. She was now left with no gifts and still possessed by perhaps a far more destructive power – human disregard. How might you change this story? (perhaps by having Silas tend to the girl and Paul to the crowds, or vice-versa?)
4. What part of this story caught your attention? Perhaps it was the amazing grace that allowed Paul and Silas, beaten black and blue and left in a disease ridden prison cell were able to sing and give thanks despite their circumstances... and the power of this capacity to continue to pray and praise freed so many other people in its power. How can each of us put more of our lives into God's hands? Placing our entire trust in God means sacrificing fear for faith. And the gift we're given is the courage to face our own persecutions without falling prey to the destructive powers that would destroy us.
5. Perhaps what caught your attention was the ease of the conversions to the faith. Or so it seemed. So many people were SO ready to accept an entirely different paradigm for living. Perhaps it has made you consider how many are outside our doors searching for a better way to live and to love, and wanting to help them find the power to do so.
6. Perhaps what caught your attention was not only the question the jailer asked to Paul and Silas: "What must I do to be saved?" but the answer that Silas provided: "Believe on the Lord Jesus." But what does it really mean to "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ?" This is still a difficult question today, and Paul's answer presents its own challenges as well. Perhaps we need to spend much more time on what it means to "believe."

Eugene Peterson translates "to believe" as "placing the fullness of our trust in God." Such that belief is an action; a sacrifice far more than an intellectual assent or decision. What would "placing the fullness of your trust in God" ask you to personally sacrifice today? Your perceived and perhaps secure powerlessness to make big changes? That God believes you are capable of in favor of your health and wholeness?

7. The gift of the Biblical story is that in any age, at any time, within any circumstance, we can find our way to God if we just spend the time and effort. Don't let this day pass without giving yourself this gift from God. Don't waste your morning without making the effort. Perhaps this will be the day that the Lord has made for YOU.

There is one more note that is irresistible: how can we read this story and not have our memories come alive with all the talk of washing wounds, being baptized, and sharing a meal? Isn't it at the heart of who we are as followers of Jesus? The Table is before us. The adventures continue, throughout the book of the Acts of the Apostles, but even more importantly today, two thousand

years later, in the church that claims to follow Jesus... and in a world still captive, a world still hungry for good news. Let us share the feast. Amen.