



## **Whose Slaves? Acts 16:16-34; John 17:20-26 Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (May 29, 2022)**

In today's passage from Acts, Paul, who was a guest of the wealthy businesswoman, Lydia, wonders with Silas through the streets of Philippi, a Roman retirement community.

A spirit-possessed slave girl follows them around announcing aloud: that they are “*slaves* of the Most High God who proclaim ... a way of salvation” (v. 17). Pretty much annoyed by the insistent harassment, Paul angrily heals the girl. Can you see Paul getting really upset and blessing the girl with freedom? How ironic that two kinds of slavery, economic and spiritual, are at work here. Slavery to God is the most liberating and affirming relationship totally opposite of love of money. Paul and Silas' spiritual “slavery” to God is free to extend blessings and healing.

The demon possession has made her a valuable asset (as a fortune-teller) for her owners up to now. With her healing, the un-named slave has lost her appeal and protection and is no more valuable than other slaves.

Naturally upset at the loss of their income stream, the owners bring Paul and Silas before the authorities. The anger at the loss of income is hidden behind charges of cultural subversion: they claim the foreigners are “disrupting the peace” but in reality, they are upsetting a convenient status quo in which they exploit the slave girl for their own gain.

Their complaint is unrelated to what is going on, and their real motive is nowhere to be found in their argument. Why not? If their complaint was legitimate, why hide it? Could it be that there was shame involved? Could it be that, although it was an accepted praxis, it wasn't a noble one? When the love of money, power, and affluence is involved then human decency, justice, and an honorable life are left behind. When people's profits are compromised, then lies abound. Can it be that their soul is enslaved to the god of money?

In a way, they are not totally wrong in claiming that there was an unlawful interference of foreign customs for the demon harassing the apostles kept announcing to a Roman audience that the foreigners, Paul and Silas, were offering a different “way of salvation”. (Acts 16:17) To the Romans, who had spent their whole life fighting in the name of the Emperor and bringing his version of peace and salvation, this is indeed offensive and subversive.

The authorities promptly have them whipped and then incarcerated in the local jail. Paul and Silas are not imprisoned because they break a law. They are imprisoned because they are imprisonable people (clearly vulnerable) who threaten the bottom line of the powerful. Far from being distressed by this turn of events, the two apostles pass the time in worship and praise: their “mid-night hour” of distress is spent witnessing to the God who saves. And the rest of the prisoners listen in.

Even when a convenient earthquake provides a means for their escape, they not only remain voluntarily in the shattered cells, but also apparently prevail upon their fellow inmates to remain in their ruined jail rather than grasp the liberty fate has offered them. So bound are they to God that they do not need the physical freedom of open jail doors. No bitterness or resentment prompts them to take advantage of the fortuitous situation.

How do you discern between life events that seem to be invitations from God to choose the higher road even if that brings suffering and death and those that resemble a lifeline out of stormy waters? I guess for both Paul and Silas, the idea of procuring real trouble for the guard should they flee is a decisive factor in choosing to stay: it is their skin at risk or that of the guard.

The most immediate and remarkable outcome is their ability to convince the rest of the prisoners to also stay. Their strong confidence gives them courage: their enslavement to God, as transpires again in the story, reveals real freedom. In his letters, Paul was not afraid of introducing himself as a slave of the Lord. When love is the operating force, the wellbeing of others is paramount. St. Augustine is known to have summed that up by saying: “Love and do whatever you want.”<sup>1</sup>

Just as the guard is about to commit suicide assuming that all the prisoners have escaped, Paul stops him and tells him that they are all accounted for. It’s evident to the jailer at this point that the God the foreigners worship asserts true authority over them and gives them the power and freedom to trust God with their very lives. The earthquake and the open jail doors are not the miracle. Their courage and inner peace are.

The Roman soldier is so overwhelmed by this turn of events that he, visibly shaken, falls at their feet and inquires about salvation. Paul and Silas jump at the opportunity and speak “the word of the Lord to him and to all...in his house.” (v. 32) So, the jailer, touched by their regard for his life, engages in an act of kindness and washes their wounds, demonstrating his gratitude. Then, he and his entire household join the new group of Christians, and Paul and Silas become honored guests in his home and share a meal together.

At Paul’s arrival at Philippi in Macedonia, a Greek family, Lydia’s, converts to Christianity. Now, a Roman family, the jailer’s, embraces the new Way. This is a clear development of the mission to the Gentiles and the preaching of the gospel to the nations of the world.

The Gospel continues the theme of encounter and intimacy. The story describes the beautiful unity existing between the Godhead and Jesus. At prayer, Jesus prays that those whom he loves may also share in the same divine oneness that he shares in with his God. This unity is a visible expression of God’s love in the community and draws others to faith.

Jesus has been praying for all of us. He prays for his immediate disciples and then he prays for those who will believe because of them, like a domino effect. Jesus cares for and loves us with the same love God the Father has loved him. Can you believe it? The same love! And that love so nurtured Jesus and kept him closer to the Father to give him life even when people tried to snuff it out of him. That same love draws us closer to God now and at the time of our death.

Let us grow in the awareness of that love. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://harpadei.com/en/love-and-do-whatever-you-want/>