

Saved, or Enslaved?

The Book of Acts is full of stories like this one, stories of high drama, with ordinary men and women who become filled with the Holy Spirit, after which they do extraordinary things. Two weeks ago we heard the story of Peter and Cornelius. Today Luke the author shifts his focus from Peter to Paul, from Jerusalem to Philippi, from God-fearing Gentiles like Cornelius to Emperor-worshipping Roman citizens like the jailer.

Today's story is a story about enslavement, and a story of salvation. It reminds us that in this life there are many ways of being enslaved, but there is only one true salvation. And so for those of you who pay attention to titles, I've changed mine. I'm now calling it "Saved, or Enslaved?"

Luke introduces us, first of all, to a slave girl whose owners were exploiting her mercilessly. In fact, they were getting rich off of her paranormal gift of divining the future. Why she was enslaved to them Luke doesn't say; perhaps her parents were in debt, and their only way of paying was giving them their daughter. It so happened that she had a special gift of divination. Or was it a curse? Was she enslaved not just by her owners but by an evil spirit within her? Was this by now her only identity, her only source of self worth? She deserves a name, but in this story she remains nameless. Nevertheless, as soon as she saw Paul and Silas she perceived that they were enslaved to a different spirit, which she called the spirit of the Most High God. And so she began following them, day after day. Longing to be freed of her spirit. Longing to receive theirs. It's rather amusing that Paul was annoyed by her persistent crying out. But as the saying goes, the squeaky wheel receives the grease, and finally Paul orders the evil spirit to come out of her, which it does that very hour. As the girl disappears from the scene we can hear her cries of relief and joy.

What evil spirits are we enslaved to? What lies do they tell us? What false sense of worth do they impart? How badly do we want to be saved from these spirits? How squeaky are we willing to be? Willing enough to ask God boldly for healing and salvation, like Bartimaeus asked Jesus in the Children's Story?

Let's look at the slave girl's owners. It's clear that they cared nothing for her. All they cared about was the golden egg she had brought to them in the form of her paranormal power. They had quickly discovered that people will pay good money to have their fortunes told! They needed no other source of income; their future was gravy!

But now that had been snatched away by this foreigner named Paul and his friend Silas. The girl's spirit of divination was gone. Angry, her owners went to the magistrates and brought false accusations against Paul and Silas. Greed will do that to people. The love of money blinds us to the truth.

How enslaved are we to money? How blind are we to where life's true treasure lies? How upset would we be if our wealth was suddenly taken away?

The magistrates in this story were servants of the Roman empire and its god emperor. Their job was to maintain the status quo in Philippi, the Pax Romana which was really no peace at all. They were slaves of the empire's laws, its false sense of propriety, its culture of cohesion

and conformity. They were slaves of their fears, of that which is different, or foreign. According to the slave girl's owners, these foreigners were disturbing the peace in Philippi. And you just don't disturb the peace. The magistrates didn't even bother to verify the owners' accusations. Assuming they were true, those foreigners needed to be stopped immediately. Strip them! Beat them! Teach them that non-conformers are *persona non grata* in the Roman Empire.

How enslaved are we to the empire in which we live? What price are we willing to pay for conformity to our culture? Are we willing to pay with our souls? Is our sense of propriety nothing but a distortion of human worth as given by God? What truths and true people have we ordered beaten with rods and then thrown into prison? How often have we washed our hands of what is right, believing it, without question, to be wrong? How enslaved are we to our fears of that which is different or foreign?

The slave girl called it; Paul was a slave of the Most High God. If only she had seen him before. Paul had been a slave of his own ego, a Pharisee who had all the answers, who saw the world in black and white, right and wrong. He had spent years pursuing and persecuting the followers of a fictional god known as Jesus Christ. Until one night he met the risen Christ while he was on the road to Damascus. Temporarily blinded, he had several days to regain his sight, to rethink his priorities, and to think through everything Christ had said to him. The eventual result of all that rethinking was a complete 180 in Paul's life. The great persecutor became the persecuted, the jailer became jailed, the beater became the beaten. Yet the joy he now felt was worth every night in a prison cell, every strike of the rod, every lash of the whip. All of his former achievements and greatness now meant nothing to him. Now he was content to be a slave of the Most High God, a slave of Jesus Christ, a slave of the Holy Spirit which lived within him.

How ready and willing are we to become slaves of Christ? What suffering are we willing to endure? How large and unwieldy are our egos? What are we willing to give up to make room for the Holy Spirit? Do we need a 180? What might that look like? Where might it take us?

The jailer was enslaved to his job. He took great pride in his perfectionism. So when the city magistrates sent him two new prisoners, along with instructions for their treatment, he asked no questions. A job well done is a job done according to others' instruction, no ifs, ands, or buts. Sure, I'll put these scoundrels in the innermost cell. Sure, I'll fasten their feet in the stocks. Anything to make Philippi a safer place to live. Glad to do my job.

That night's earthquake did more than damage the jail. It caused cracks in his perfectionism, it ruined his reputation. His prisoners had surely all escaped; his own life was forfeit. Nothing for it but to take his sword and end it all.

Except the prisoners hadn't escaped, specifically the two in the innermost cell, whose security he had promised to ensure. The sounds of their joyful singing penetrated his despair and prompted him to investigate. Sure enough, there they were, sitting in their cell, chains broken, imprisoning walls crumbled, yet content to remain in jail and sing hymns to their God.

The jailer wanted their joy. "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" "Believe in the Lord Jesus" was their answer. "Who is he, that I may believe in him?" Rather than flee to freedom, these two men of God remained behind that they might teach the jailer about Jesus, the son of God who had himself been arrested, flogged, and even executed, rather than forsake God's rule of love and peace and compassion.

That night, this jailer became a slave of Jesus, a servant of God, he and his entire household. And everyone rejoiced that he had become a believer. The story doesn't say whether he lost his job as jailer. Seems safe to say he didn't care, one way or another.

Let us pray. Lord, let us be slaves in your kingdom. Let your Holy Spirit dwell within us. May we share our beliefs without hesitation or fear. May we love the things of this world without becoming enslaved by them. May we know the joy of your salvation, a joy which supersedes all manner of enslavement. Amen.