

*Grace, mercy & peace from God our Father & Our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Chapter 16 of the Book of Acts the unlikely beginnings of one of Christianity's first Gentile churches – the church of Philippi. As this drama account plays out in the foreground, a confrontation occurs in the background, and *basic assumptions – assumptions that everyone takes for granted – are confronted and questioned.*

*Who's bound and who is free?*

*Whose powerless and who is powerful?*

*Who's rich and who is poor?*

In the beginning of chapter 16 – our Acts reading last week – we hear about Lydia. She is rich – a merchant in purple – a very expensive and precious dye. Though Lydia has everything – what everyone seeks, yet we find her outside of Philippi down by the river seeking to fill the spiritual vacuum – the emptiness of her life. Lydia seeks meaning and purpose for her life. She becomes a “believer in God” – that's New Testament code for a gentile who has adopted the beliefs of the Jews, and takes some comfort there. Paul and Silas listen to her story of searching. They tell her about Jesus who gives Himself up completely for others, fulfills the prophecies, and brings salvation to all people including the gentiles. Lydia finds what she's been looking for – the One who finally fills her emptiness.

Hearing about Jesus, God moves Lydia's heart to fullness; she and her household are baptized. Finally, Lydia who has what everyone wants, finds what she needs. And the woman of independent means stoops to become the servant, urging Paul and Silas to stay with her.

Next on the scene, a slave girl bound by a demon with a spirit of divination who can tell fortunes begins following Paul and Silas around. In

bondage to this spirit, the girl follows Paul and Silas around Philippi, screaming “*These men are slaves to the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.*” The message doesn’t bother Paul; the messenger and the spirit’s power over the slave girl annoy Paul, and the profiteering of her owners annoys Paul. And so simply, and without apparent effort, Paul cast the demon out in the name of Jesus; and the girl is free from her bondage. We hear nothing more of that spirit.

One would think that *having a spirit cast out of one’s slave would be a good thing, but apparently that’s not how her owners see it when they consider all the money they’re going to lose.* So, Paul and Silas are dragged before the magistrate, and they go as though powerless. There they are swiftly punished, being stripped, flogged, and handed over the jailer to be thrown into prison. Paul knows that this is a distinct possibility when he confronts the powers holding the girl.

Obedying the orders of “those in power,” the jailer places Paul and Silas in the most secure cell in the building and chains their feet to the floor. It seems quite obvious at this point that Paul and Silas are completely at the mercy of the powers that be in Philippi.

*That’s why it’s so startling to hear them singing hymns and praying at the darkest hour – midnight.* The jailer hears them; the other helpless, hopeless prisoners hear them. *The powers that be in Philippi neither dampen Paul and Silas’ spirits, nor intimidate them.* Rather, *they concern themselves with the praises and thanksgiving to their Lord Jesus Christ. So far in this narrative, they seem to be the only ones who understand what power is and who is in control.* But *everybody’s else is about to find out.*

Suddenly *a violent earthquake* shakes the foundations of the prison, throws open all the gates and cell door of the jail, and as *if that isn’t conclusive*

*enough evidence of God at work, everyone's chains are suddenly unlocked* – as if earthquakes unlock leg irons all the time.

When the jailor realizes what's happened, he fears the punishment for losing his prisoners more than death. He draws his sword to kill himself. This seems strange to us, but not so in a culture of honor. Since a jailor's life is collateral for his prisoners, there's far more dignity to taking his own life than being made an example of in front of other soldiers – stripped, beaten, flogged, and beheaded. At least if he commits suicide, he'll be remembered as a good soldier who took his duty seriously. Duty bound – the jailer finds himself imprisoned in a system where one's duty is more important than one's life.

As he's about to fall on his sword Paul's voice comes from the cell, "*Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.*" So here's this jailor – likely a hardened centurion late in his career – who treats his prisoners including Paul and Silas with contempt, and *yet Paul demonstrates an overriding concern for his life*. As if to say, "*Your life is more precious than mere duty. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus loves you, and wants you to know peace – not the PAX Romana – the peace of Rome guaranteed with the threat of death – but the peace which passes all understanding.*"

The jailor has witnessed Paul and Silas' joy that is unhindered by beating and imprisonment, and now experiencing their concern for him – their persecutor – the jailer asks what he must do to have this peace which passes all understanding; the one who holds others prisoner gets set free from bondage, and is baptized.

In so doing, *the jailer also stops to become a servant – washing their wounds, setting food before them, bringing them into his own home.*

Chapter 16 reveals the first inroads of the Church in the gentile, Greek world, and *yet the opportunity for speaking the Word that saves in all three cases comes not from what we could be called traditional evangelism, but rather – life*

*lived in the awareness of the needs of their neighbor.* For Lydia it is recognizing that this woman of wealth has a longing and poverty of spirit that can only be filled with the good news and God's love for her. *In the case of the possessed child*, it is recognizing her exploitation – by both the demon and her owners, and taking action to liberate her. *For the jailer* Paul shows compassion demonstrating that God's love and acceptance does not depend on duty or obedience.

Paul and Silas seek to bear witness to their Lord Jesus, but they do so not through mere words, but *by meeting these three people at the raw edges of their lives*. Paul and Silas bear witness to their Lord Jesus by honoring Lydia's search for meaning. For the slave girl, Paul's exorcism of the enslaving spirit proclaims that Jesus desires all people to be free of overpowering influences. Their action on her behalf, leads her to join Lydia's church. To the prisoners and jailer, Paul's and Silas' singing of hymns and prayer after being severely beaten and locked down without hope of escape, gets their attention, but their concern for them provide the opportunity to speak about Jesus.

*So much is not as it appears: Death is not the final word;* What everyone seems to want is not necessarily precious or of value – wealthy people can also know profound spiritual poverty; People who are busy all the time – running from this thing to that thing, though their lives may seem full, they may be empty. Those who live under the Lordship of violence and death, may desire a Lord of life, mercy and forgiveness.

When we meet people where they are in their lives, demonstrating care and concern for their lives and struggles, that is where the church grows, disciples are made, and freedom and peace are won. WE need only care as Jesus cares – about each person – and the Church cannot help but grow and disciples of our Lord Jesus be made.

*Amen !!!*