

# Justice and Faith

by Rev. John C. Cheek



*"Suddenly... all the prison doors were open."*

## **Scripture: Acts 16:16-34 (NIV)**

<sup>16</sup> Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. <sup>17</sup> She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." <sup>18</sup> She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

<sup>19</sup> When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. <sup>20</sup> They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar <sup>21</sup> by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

<sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. <sup>24</sup> When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open,

and everyone's chains came loose. <sup>27</sup> The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

<sup>29</sup> The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

<sup>31</sup> They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." <sup>32</sup> Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. <sup>33</sup> At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. <sup>34</sup> The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

## SERMON – Justice and Faith

### Introduction

In this chapter Luke temporarily stops using the words "they" and "them" and uses "we" and "us." Although many ideas have been suggested about this, the simplest and most reasonable one is that Luke was a participant in some of the events recounted in Acts, and that he learned of other events from those who were present.

The events in this story take place in Philippi, a Roman colony on the coast of Greece, presently in Kavala. It was at the time of our writing a Roman colony where retired officers and other members of the Roman army retired, as well as all those business interests which grew up in such a colony. The young enslaved woman is possessed of a spirit which allowed her to make predictions about the future. She herself didn't derive any benefit from this spirit. It was her owners who became at least moderately wealthy at her expense. This is a story of justice, as well as one of faithfulness.

### Prayer

Gracious God, our sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo. Forgive what our lips tremble to name, what our hearts can no longer bear, and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgement. Set us free from a past we cannot change, open us to a future in which we can be changed, and grant us grace to grow more and more in your likeness and image; through Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Amen.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

## The Text

(v. 16–18) Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future.

(v. 16b) She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortunetelling.

(v. 17 & 18a) She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, “These men are the servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” She kept this up for many days.

(v. 18b) Finally, Paul became so annoyed *[We should pause for a moment to examine why Paul reacts in the way he does. It may be more accurate to translate the word as “troubled” rather than “annoyed.” There may be a couple of explanations for Paul’s response. For Jews, either in Israel or here in the Gentile world, the expression “the Most High God” is quite clear. The reference is obviously to Adonai, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, to the Greek mind (and remember, this story takes place in Greece, not in Israel), the expression doesn’t mean any more than that god who is at the top of one’s personal pantheon of various gods. This understanding of the phrase doesn’t do anything to further Paul’s mission of bringing the gospel to this Gentile city. Additionally, this woman’s behavior is a constant reminder that she is suffering as a result of the spirit which has entered her being, and this fact is troubling to Paul as well.]* that he turned around and said to the spirit, “In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!” At that moment the spirit left her. *[And this is the last we hear of her. We don’t know what happened to her next. Surely, we hope that she becomes connected with the Christian community in Philippi, but Luke’s story doesn’t tell us any more about her.]*

(v. 19–21) When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone... *[Here Luke uses a clever wordplay. In Greek it would read that the spirit left and their hope left also.]*

(v. 18b) they seized Paul and Silas.

(v. 19c) and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. *[In the marketplace, along with all the merchant stalls, there was a section set aside for magistrates to hear complaints and adjudicate them.]*

(v. 20 & 21) They brought them before the magistrates and said, “These men are Jews *[they appeal to the anti-Semitic attitudes in the region]* and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.” *[Notice that they don’t say anything about the fact that Paul has cost them business by liberating the woman from the spirit’s power. Their stated complaint concerns a threat to the populous, not to their own lifestyle.]*

(v. 22–24) The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods.

(v. 23) After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown in prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully.

(v. 24) When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell *[the cell farthest from the gates]* and fastened their feet in the stocks.

(v. 25–28) About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

(v. 26a) Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken.

(v. 26b) At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose.

(v. 27) The jailer woke up, and

(v. 27b) when he saw the prison doors open

(v. 27c) he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. *[Apparently, he felt that a quick death was preferable to the treatment he would receive from the Roman officials.]*

(v. 28) But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

(v. 29 & 30) The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" *[It isn't clear whether he is talking about being saved from punishment by his superiors or about salvation in the greater sense. Regardless, Paul and Silas tell him what he most needs to know.]*

(v. 31–34) They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."

(v. 32) Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all others in his house.

(v. 33a) At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds;

(v. 33b) then immediately he and all his household were baptized.

(v. 34a) The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them;

(v. 34b) He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

### **What can we take away from this text this morning?**

I think there are several lessons we can take away from this story. The first has to do with the woman who was possessed by the spirit. Paul freed her from this possession. Who was she? She was essentially a nobody. She was a woman in a culture that valued men. She was a slave in a culture that valued freedom. She was controlled by a spirit in a culture that valued self-control and self-sufficiency. And yet Paul frees her.

We live in a culture that values many of these same things. And so the question arises: whose problem are the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, those who are broken? There are any number of entities lining up to say that these individuals are not their problem. The church, however, if we seek to follow Jesus faithfully, reaches out in love and grace and care. We are blessed to encounter those who are among “the least of these” and we are further blessed in serving them and alleviating their needs.

A second lesson is that, in the time of this story and today, sometimes doing the right thing, the faithful thing, comes at a cost. For Paul and Silas, the cost was a beating and a cell in a Roman prison with no clear view of what the future would be. As we seek to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, we must be aware of the potential costs, and we must be prepared to accept those costs. This is simply a part of our faithful journey.

A third lesson we can take away is that, regardless of our circumstances, we can always choose to glorify God. In a cell, with their feet locked in painful stocks, Paul and Silas choose to pray to God, to sing praises to God, to glorify God. Over the years I’ve served in ministry, I’ve seen again and again people who were terminally ill who told me about God’s goodness and mercy. These sisters and brothers are examples to us of the courage and peace that comes from knowing their Lord.

A final lesson we can take from this passage is this one: the things we do and say are always a witness to our relationship with God. When we are gracious and kind and generous and compassionate, we show the world something about what it means to follow the carpenter from Nazareth. And when we are unkind and mean and selfish and self-serving, we are showing the world that this is what it means to follow Jesus.

Last week we saw that the world can see that we are Jesus’ disciples by the way we love one another. My friends, my sisters and brothers, we are always, in everything we say and everything we do, a witness to Jesus and his teachings. The question for us is, what kind of witness will I be?

Friends, will you walk with the poor and marginalized? Will you know the potential cost and still do the faithful, Christlike thing? Will you seek to praise and glorify God regardless of your circumstances, knowing in the depth of your being that God already loves you extravagantly? Will you seek to be a positive witness to what it means to live in the love of Jesus, the Christ? May it be so. Amen.

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