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## **Freedom Acts 16:16-34**

*One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. <sup>17</sup> While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you<sup>[d]</sup> a way of salvation." <sup>18</sup> She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.*

*<sup>19</sup> But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. <sup>20</sup> When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews <sup>21</sup> and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." <sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. <sup>24</sup> Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost 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 prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. <sup>27</sup> When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." <sup>29</sup> The jailer<sup>[e]</sup> called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.*

*<sup>30</sup> Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"*

*<sup>31</sup> They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." <sup>32</sup> They spoke the word of the Lord<sup>[f]</sup> to him and to all who were in his house. <sup>33</sup> At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. <sup>34</sup> He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.*

When reading this passage this past week,  
I was struck by the **concept of freedom**.

**Who is really free** in this passage—at the **beginning** of the story?

And what about at the **end**?

And **who grants** that freedom?

Let's start with the **girl with a spirit** of divination,  
owned by men who are making money from her trade,  
And she is strangely shouting:

*"These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you<sup>[d]</sup> a way of salvation."*

This unnamed woman is struggling with **two kinds of bondage**—  
she is a slave to owners who profit from her,  
and she has this spirit of divination in her!  
She is obviously not free when this story begins.

**Paul and Silas** start out free, but after Paul casts out the spirit from the slave girl, they are literally arrested, beaten, and put into the most dark and damp inner cell of the prison, their feet in stocks.  
They are not free.

But there's another main character who isn't free isn't there?

**What about that jailer?** In many ways he is not free.

First he has been stationed here at the prison,

and told to oversee even those in the innermost cell.

And when the earthquake opens all the cells, and breaks everyone's chains,

He feels like his only recourse was to die by his own sword!

He is not a free man, is he?

**Thankfully, the story doesn't end there.**

Paul casts out the spirit from the slave girl, who has been strangely **acknowledging** the presence of the Most High God.

God sends the earthquake to open the doors of the prison and break the chains, after Paul and Silas have been up all night

**Praying and singing** praise to God!

They've been having church—while in chains!

And the jailer, after hearing this strange prison worship, and witnessing the earthquake likely sent by their God, and learning that the prisoners did not escape, he starts to kill himself, but at Paul's urging he stops.

Then he *fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.* <sup>30</sup> Then he brought them outside and said, "**Sirs, what must I do to be saved?**" <sup>31</sup> They answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

<sup>32</sup> They spoke the word of the Lord<sup>li</sup> to him and to his house.

<sup>33</sup> He took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized!

<sup>34</sup> He fed them, and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer!

Did you notice **any common thread** in these stories of chains to freedom?

The **girl** is pronouncing the name of God.

**Paul and Silas** are praying and singing in prison.

The **Jailer** ignores the honorable Roman custom of suicide in a situation like this, and asks what it takes to be saved.

All these people **turn to God**.

Specifically, they are **praising God!**

**What if, in and through that praise,**

they are set free from the various chains that bind them?

Which got me thinking—**what is holding us captive?**

Where are we not free?

What are the chains that bind our hearts and minds, our bodies?

And how can we turn in that imprisonment, to God?

How can we even praise God in our situation?

What are the chains in your life, today?

Is it an **addiction?**

A seemingly uncontrollable desire to want substances, even food, that is harmful to us?

Is it **bitterness or anger?**

A feeling that we cannot let go of our past hurt or abuse, that we need to seek revenge, that we want them to suffer as we have.

Is it **jealousy**?

Are we consumed with thoughts about how others have it better,  
or easier in life?

Do we want what they have, more than what God has for us?

Is it **depression**?

Are we overwhelmed with sorrow, sadness, grief or loss?

Are we struggling just to get out of bed in the morning?

Is it **worry, or fear**?

Are we obsessed with the 'what if's' of life?

What if this happens, what if that fails....

Do we worry about not just today, but also tomorrow?

Are we afraid of what lies ahead, things we cannot control, forces much larger  
than us in the world?

Think about what it is for you.

Where are your chains?

**Where is your bondage?**

Your imprisonment?

**What if you could have freedom—true freedom from all of it?**

Isn't our God **a God of freedom**?

What is the pivotal story of the Old Testament?

Wasn't it the release of God's people from Egypt?

The **Exodus** became the defining moment in the lives of the Israelites,

All the way until Jesus came to live among us!

If you were to read through the Old Testament you would hear God's  
reminder to the people that he was the God who brought them out of slavery!

And then a **Messiah** is promised by the prophets,  
the Prince of Peace, the one who will set everyone free!

Indeed, at the birth of Jesus, **Angels** proclaim peace on earth,  
**Simeon and Anna** meet the babe in the temple and speak of the  
Salvation that Jesus will bring.

**Jesus' first sermon** in Nazareth includes these promises of freedom:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to **proclaim release** to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the **oppressed go free**,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*  
(Luke 4:18-19),

And of course **Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross**  
brings us the greatest freedom of all—  
**freedom from all our sin!**

**Our God is a God of freedom**, from slavery and bondage of any kind!  
It doesn’t matter what is holding us captive,  
Whatever the source of our chains and bondage,  
**God** wants to set us free.  
**Jesus** wants to set us free.  
The **Holy Spirit** wants freedom for us.

The past couple of weeks we’ve been talking a lot about the **Holy Spirit**.  
as our Advocate, our Counselor, our Comforter.  
Apparently this Comfort, counsel and help, **brings freedom!**  
Praise God!

**2 Corinthians 3:17** says: *where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*  
Isn’t that incredible news?

**So, how do we find this freedom** promised to us, by our loving, living God?  
What if it’s like **finding the peace** of Christ?

Last week we talked about the peace of Christ,  
a peace so different than that of the world,  
and how we have to **RECEIVE** it.  
We can’t create it, or grab it,  
we have to open our grip on everything else that promises peace,  
so we can have open hands and hearts for the peace of Christ  
to come into our lives!

What if freedom is like that?  
 What if it too, is **a gift** of God?  
 What if it is **something that we RECEIVE** from God?  
 And what if we have to **let go** of all that burdens us,  
**Surrendering** our lives to God,  
 So we can **receive the gift** of being truly free?

You know, the **12-steps** of Alcoholics Anonymous are so wise, and quite scriptural when you examine them.

Listen to the first 3 steps:

- ☐ *We admitted we were powerless over our addiction, and our lives had become unmanageable.*
- ☐ *Came to believe a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*
- ☐ *Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.*

That sounds an awful lot **like surrendering our lives to God**, doesn't it?  
 It sounds like letting go of what chains us,  
 so that we can receive God's help!

Just think how powerful **if every one of us would do** those three steps  
 (or all 12 for that matter!)  
 What if we admitted that we are powerless over the chains in our life—  
 whether it be addiction, worry, bitterness, or fear?

What if we believed that **God alone could bring us sanity**,  
 And we committed to turn our will and our lives over to God?

That sounds an awful lot like the Christian receiving God's grace.  
 It sounds like **a pathway to freedom**, doesn't it?  
 But I think there is **even more!**

**Because our God is a God of freedom**,  
 we **always have a reason to praise** God, no matter our circumstances!  
 We can always sing and pray our praise and thanksgiving—why?  
 Because our God remains faithful, merciful, gracious, loving, forgiving,  
 and our God brings freedom!

So we always have a **reason, and an opportunity** to praise God!  
 We always have a reason to **count our blessings**—

even from the confines of a prison cell!

***It's not crazy that they sang songs of praise to God—***  
when faced with the most severe trials,  
we always have a choice of how to respond, right?

We can ***focus on the bad,***  
We can whine and complain about what is not going our way.

OR we can ***focus on the blessings and promises*** of God,  
even when we cannot see them,  
even when those promises seem far away!

That's the ***definition of faith*** actually.  
Remember **Hebrews 11:1?**

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

What if ***praise is part of our pathway*** to true freedom?

It sounds pretty simple when I explain it to the kids,  
And I know it's ***far more complicated.***  
I know that we adults have lived more life,  
so it's ***not always so easy*** to just count our blessings,  
or sing Jesus Loves Me, right?

Most of us have ***experienced too much*** of life's hardships.  
I've been reading a good book called  
Healing the Invisible Wounds of Trauma, by Kristen Krueger  
She is a survivor of the Columbine High School shooting in 1999,  
the beginning of what would become the most sickening trend in America—  
mass shootings.

And she has a lot to say about ***how she recovered*** from that trauma,  
and many other horrible experiences that compounded  
that trauma from high school.

She cites studies that say over the course of a lifetime,  
60% of people will have experienced some kind of trauma.  
Kristen Krueger, Healing the Invisible Wounds of Trauma, Illumify: 2019, pg. 92

Most of us have not survived a mass shooting,  
 But many have survived ***something traumatizing***.  
 It may have been physical abuse.  
 It may have been rape or sexual assault.  
 It may have been the loss of a child.  
 It may have been the aftermath of storms or natural disasters,  
 Or a horrible crime.

***Trauma comes in all forms and fashions***, and all of it can hold us hostage.  
 It can be like a ***chain to the pain, and the past***.

And no matter what the chains are around us,  
 we ***need to be set free!***

And when I suggest that we let go of all that,  
 When I suggest that we count our blessings, and praise God,  
 You might be thinking—***are you kidding?***  
 Don't you know what I've been through?

***I hear you.***

And I believe ***what the Scriptures say about God's love and care*** for us,  
 especially when we are wounded.  
 I would suggest we ***re-read the Psalms***,  
 and see how God mourns when we mourn.  
 And I would suggest that we read ***Psalm 56:8***, which contains this promise:  
*You (God) have kept count of my exile;  
 put my tears in your bottle.  
 Are they not in your record?*

In other words—God knows of every time we have been hurt, left out,  
 abandoned...and God has counted and stored all our tears in a bottle!  
 Have you ever thought about that image?  
***Do you realize that God cares about our every tear?***

And, this same God who counts our tears,  
 is the God who ***desires freedom*** for us—  
 from absolutely anything that binds us!

And ***healing is easier said than done.***



Many times, healing is an ***uphill battle***, messy, and even painful.  
It can feel like the 3 steps forward, followed by 2 steps back.

And of course, it's ***not always easy to count blessings***, or praise God, right?  
Sometimes we must get away from the pain and abuse first—  
God does not want us to be in abusive or harmful relationships or situations!

And often, we need the ***wise counsel*** of other Christians, therapists,  
psychologists, or psychiatrists to help us move toward true freedom.  
And I believe the ***Holy Spirit can work*** through all of them!

And first, we have to ***get honest*** about our pain, or addiction, or worry,  
When we are honest about our situation,  
We can ***honestly thank God*** for every good gift,  
even those in the midst of our pain!

I was remembering the help of my Bible study friends,  
when two of us were going through a particularly difficult time.  
Our friend Bill brought some old dishes from Goodwill,  
and suggested we just take out our anger and frustration by breaking them!  
Sounds crazy, but it felt great!

I believe sometimes we need to break some dishes, or scream into a pillow,  
Or cry our eyes out,  
And all of that can be ***so healthy and good***, and ***God can use it—***  
***to help set us free!***

Strangely, when we ***honestly admit that we are powerless*** over our chains,  
that's when a dam breaks, and we can find freedom!  
Right after we broke those dishes, we laughed and laughed...  
because we had let go of some of the pain.  
And then we all talked about the rays of light that God was bringing,  
even in the midst of terrible times.  
We talked about our blessings, and ***praised God***,  
for accepting us, just where we are.

In my favorite devotional, *Streams in the Desert*, on May 26<sup>th</sup> I read the most  
amazing thing about the Israelites.  
While wandering in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt,

They came to a place where they desperately needed water.

And you know what they did?

They sang a song!

They praised God---and what happened?

Water sprang up from the well! (Numbers 21:17)

Their ***praise led to their freedom*** from thirst!

In the same way, ***our praise breaks open the 'river of blessings'*** flowing underneath us! L.B. Cowman, *Streams in the Desert*, May 26<sup>th</sup> entry.

So, even when our circumstances are difficult,  
by ***singing and praying and praising*** God—  
we ***break open the way of freedom!***

What if we counted our blessings?

What if we took time out of our pain, to praise and thank God?

What does that look like for you?

***How can you do that this week? today?***

Today's ***offertory*** is a song the kids will sing at VBS,  
a hymn that we will sing next week, called "*Come to Jesus*".  
It's a touching song about our surrender to Jesus.

Friends, hear the ***Good News of the Gospel:***

God wants us to be free.

So, what if we ***surrender*** our lives to God?

What if we take time to ***praise, and give thanks?***

What if that ***opens the 'river of blessings'?***

Let's do it--- let's praise God,

And let all God's people say, Amen.