

# Ripples of Freedom

BY KATHERINE CALLAHAN-HOWELL

**God desires that the spiritual freedom that we receive in Christ Jesus should cascade into others' lives. Sometimes this happens in unpredictable ways. In Acts 16:16-34, an unnamed slave woman sets in motion a course of wonderful, freeing events that we remember and celebrate today.**

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**D**aily the slave woman of Acts 16:16-34 sits in the marketplace of Philippi and peddles her wares. Instead of the typical food or pots, she sells fortunes and makes a great profit for her owner. For the service she dispenses there is no expensive overhead; she needs no materials to spin her web of the future, enticing passersby to purchase knowledge of their fate. Her owners value her greatly. Slaves usually save labor for their owners, but this woman actually generates revenue! She is a first century cash cow.

Until the Apostle Paul comes along, that is.

The slave woman has some privileges. She at least has the freedom to wander around the marketplace to stir the curiosity of potential customers, promising information about their chances at love and fortune. She is accustomed to calling out to the passersby her offerings of fortunes told. She knows how to attract business.

Then Paul and Silas begin crossing her path as they go to the place of prayer beside the river established with the local Christians. The spirit that empowers her to tell fortunes also grasps the reality of the message proclaimed by Paul and his friends. Even though they are only passing through the market, she begins following them, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

She is absolutely right about this, of course. Like the spirits who blurted out truths about Jesus' identity, the spirit inside the woman understands

that Paul and his companions are proclaiming the one true God. You might think that someone heralding the men's approach by announcing their business and clarifying their intention toward salvation to the masses would be seen as a benefit. Perhaps that is how Paul saw the situation at first, but not as the slave woman persisted for many days.

Does Paul disdain the source—not the woman, but the spirit within her? Does he not want to attract attention in this public venue, hoping to convert people without the authorities' notice? Or does he just tire of her shouting? He is finally "so annoyed" that he calls out the spirit from the woman, and the spirit obeys. The woman is now free—at least, from the spirit.

Her owners do not rejoice in her spiritual deliverance. Realizing their loss of income, they drag Paul and Silas to the authorities and make complaints worthy of their arrest. They do not say to the magistrates, "These men cast the spirit out of our slave that brought us a great income." Instead they accuse them of causing an uproar and advocating unlawful customs. In reality, their slave has caused more of a disturbance by shouting in the marketplace than Paul and Silas ever have by walking quietly through it on their way to the place of prayer.

The crowd joins with the owners in attacking Paul and Silas, leaving the authorities little choice but to act in response. They have Paul and Silas stripped, severely flogged, thrown into jail, and chained up for the night. In the marvelous scene that follows—it has become for us a beloved story of praise in the midst of hardship—Paul and Silas are singing hymns, praying, and teaching the other prisoners while bound in their chains, until they are all rescued by an earthquake. God literally shakes the prisoners free of their chains. To top off the miracle, the jailer and his family receive salvation.



"Overwhelmingly when a woman (or girl) appears in the biblical text, this rarity *heralds* an upcoming event as important," Robin Gallaher Branch has noted. "Narrators may intentionally use a woman's or girl's entrance into the text to raise, as it were, a *red flag* that announces the significance of this part of the story."<sup>†</sup> Branch's observation certainly holds true in this passage. The appearance of the nameless female slave alerts us to notable events—the admirable attitude of Paul and Silas through their suffering, their delivery from unjust imprisonment, and the salvation of an entire family. None of these events would have transpired if not for this spirit-possessed woman, whose healing landed the apostles in their predicament.

A few verses earlier in this chapter, we find another significant woman—Lydia. Paul and his companions can linger in Philippi only because of her

gracious hospitality (Acts 16:14-15). Lydia is a woman of influence, a business woman dealing in purple cloth. After her conversion and the baptism of her household, she insists that Paul and his compatriots stay in her home. She is very generous (like the women who funded Jesus' travels), creating a safe space for Paul to operate in Philippi. Because of Lydia's important role in this story, we name children after her and use her as a model for good business practices and hospitality. But what of this unnamed woman? She too *heralds* in the miraculous story of the earthquake and the prison-keeper's conversion.

We do not know what fate the slave woman suffers at the hands of her owners, angered at their loss of income. Their anger at Paul has resulted in his arrest; it's unimaginable that she would not suffer as well, being their property. Since she has lost so much value in their eyes, they have little reason to be kind to her.

Even Paul does not order her deliverance out of compassion; he does not look on her with pity and decide she deserves to be free. He commands the spirit to leave out of annoyance: he is tired of listening to her shouting, and the exorcism shuts her up. But even if Paul lacks the proper motive, she still receives deliverance. God still shows up in her life, even if for selfish reasons on Paul's part. She probably remains a slave, but is no longer exploited for her 'gift.'

Whatever horrors will come this slave woman's way, at least she is spiritually free to believe in the God who cast out the demon within her, to believe in the Christ who brings salvation as Paul proclaims. Like other women in the New Testament, she acquires privileges unusual for their gender, most importantly the freedom offered in salvation.

Her newfound spiritual freedom ripples through the story. When Paul and Silas are enchained for

daring to offer freedom to this embattled woman, they remain free to praise God despite their chains. Then God frees them from their bondage by shaking the very earth. Through the events of their physical deliverance, the jailer "and his whole household" — probably his wife and children and possibly his servants — received spiritual freedom as they are saved and baptized, and share a meal with Paul and Silas.

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Historically women have been subjugated in various ways. While some women have had the liberty to use their gifts for their own gain and to bless others, too many women have been exploited for what they have to offer — their natural skills, their learned abilities, and (sometimes) their very selves.

Still today, women are often enslaved, mistreated, and used against their will. Too often their champions respond, like Paul, more out of annoyance than compassion. But God wants women's freedom. God wants them to walk in wholeness, to be delivered from what controls them, to be able to live life in peace.

God desires that the spiritual freedom that we receive in Christ Jesus should cascade into their lives. Sometimes this happens in unpredictable ways. In this story, an unnamed slave woman sets in motion a course of wonderful, freeing events that we remember and celebrate today. We learn almost nothing about her past and we do not know the end of her story, but we know that God uses her deliverance to deliver others.

God's ways are sometimes bewildering — think of Paul and Silas's confusion when they were imprisoned for delivering this woman. But God works through all things for the good for those who love God, and I believe this often includes God using our freedom to free others. God is a God of deliverance, and we are invited to work alongside God in the freeing of our fellow humans. As we live our lives faithfully, may God use us to impact others in the name of Christ and to offer salvation to those in bondage.

#### **NOTE**

† Robin Gallaher Branch, *Jeroboam's Wife: The Enduring Contributions of the Old Testament's Least Known Women* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 8.

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