

Acts of God: Acts 16:16-34

by [Ron Hansen](#) in the [May 4, 2010](#) issue

An old insurance company term for natural disasters is “acts of God,” which unfortunately links the Holy One with everything awful and unforeseen that can befall humanity, as if God were not just capricious but wrathful and cruel. Jesus, of course, depicted his father in a completely different way, and in this passage from the Acts of the Apostles we see how Paul has learned from Christ how to discern rightly what is indebted to God and what is a counterfeit—an important lesson for all of us.

Luke, Paul, Timothy and Silas are in the Roman colony of Philippi, in the province of Macedonia where Paul founded a Christian community for which he has great affection. But a slave girl, whom the King James Bible describes as “possessed with a spirit of divination . . . which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying,” follows the holy entourage, crying out, “These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation.”

Some preachers working the crowds would be flattered by that line, and even encourage the girl to continue her wild form of advertising their mission as an act of God. But it is implied in the passage that despite her glorifying words, Paul looks deeply into the girl’s ravaged personality and recognizes an alien spirit that has overtaken her. Evil is seeking to ally itself with Christianity for its own corrupt purposes, either to discredit the faith or to hide behind it. Like Jesus, who was so often first proclaimed a deity by demons and always immediately ordered them to be silent, Paul is grieved by the girl’s announcement and commands the force that has possessed her to come out “in the name of Jesus Christ.” The spirit complies, and the girl seemingly becomes normal again. She can no longer foretell the future or read hearts and minds, but she is freed from the domination of wickedness. Her well-being, for Paul, is far more important than the shamming grandeur of her false praise.

But the slave owners lose out on their ill-gotten gains when she can no longer predict or presage events, and they angrily haul Paul and Silas to the magistrates, not claiming financial damages but saying these Jews were teaching religious

practices that were illegal for Romans. They don't want justice; they want revenge. (That Luke seems to have been a gentile and Timothy was half Greek and half Jewish may explain why they were not arrested as well.)

Paul and Silas are flogged—for some reason they did not announce, as they would later, that they were themselves Romans—and they are dragged, probably unconscious from pain and blood loss, into a dungeon where their ankles are locked in stocks so there will be no possibility of movement. Still, they pray aloud and sing hymns of praise that are overheard by their jailor. And then the seemingly miraculous happens. There is an earthquake that jars loose the doors of the jail and somehow unhinges the framework holding Paul and Silas imprisoned. It would seem to be an act of God, a “get out of jail free” card that you'd hold onto in Monopoly.

But Paul's adventures have fully acquainted him with jails and jailors. Were he and Silas to escape, the jailor would be executed, and this particular one is close to committing suicide—probably the quicker and less painful option—when Paul cries out, “Do thyself no harm: for we are all here.” Allowed the opportunity to flee, as so many naturally would have done, he instead sees that the consequence would be the loss of the life of a dearly loved human being, so the seeming rescue of the earthquake could not be from God.

The jailor can only fall before Paul and Silas in his shock and gratitude, and he becomes a convert to Christianity, illustrating his new perspective by taking Paul and Silas into his house, feeding them, dressing their wounds and rejoicing, “believing in God with all his house.”

That last phrase is important, for with it, as in the Lydia conversion that begins chapter 16, Luke explains the rapid spread of Christianity by noting that just one stirred believer can influence the faith of a household, a neighborhood, a region.

And it's equally important to note the difference of Christianity in its refusal to sacrifice anyone, even an ill-regarded slave or a jailor, for gain or expediency. Everyone, it was understood, is important to God, and so acts of God could not be based on injury to anyone.

There was a little inspirational book I once read, its title and author now lost to me, in which the author pointed out that Christianity offers its own version of the Hippocratic oath that details the duties and obligations of physicians. “Above all, do no harm” is the principal duty, and that same charge is exhibited in these two

instances in Acts.