

May 29, Easter 7C (Acts 16:16-34; John 17:20-26)

## **I want to know why grace was extended to the Philippian jailer but not the slave.**

by [Greg Carey](#) in the [May 18, 2022](#) issue

Things start and end well for Paul, Silas, and their companions in Philippi. In between, not so much. Our lectionary selection concludes with the conversion of the Philippian jailer, along with his household. Prior to this passage, we witness another household conversion, that of Lydia. After the passage, the Roman authorities who have tortured and imprisoned Paul and Silas apologize and release them. The missionaries' time in Philippi concludes with a farewell visit to Lydia.

Between these household celebrations, however, Paul, Silas, and their fellow travelers experience intense conflict. One conflict leads to dismissal, the other to salvation. An enslaved woman who proclaims who Paul and Silas are and announces that they bear the message of salvation is silenced. But a jailer who tortures the pair receives the gospel and rejoices with his household. Given their circumstances and their actions, I want to know why grace extends to one but not the other. The disparity troubles me.

The first conflict involves an enslaved woman who has a "spirit of divination." She proclaims Paul and Silas's identity and mission, implicitly affirming their gospel: "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." Despite the free advertising, Paul is "very much annoyed." We do not learn what, precisely, annoys Paul. As usual, Paul is the one who speaks; we never hear Silas's voice. The woman follows Paul around, shouting this message "for many days." That could be annoying all by itself, and Paul may believe her conduct is detracting from his message. Paul may object to her possession by a spirit—literally, a "pythonic spirit." We do not fully understand the phenomenon, but some people in the ancient Mediterranean associated prophecy with snakes.

Whatever the reason, Paul responds by casting out the spirit. Acts does not tell us what this spiritual deliverance means for the enslaved woman: Are we to consider

her liberated from demonic possession, or has she lost the spiritual gift that made her valuable to her enslavers? Both realities may apply at once. The story invests all its energy in Paul, not in her.

A recent study by Christy Cobb points out that, although this enslaved woman is telling the truth, the story discards her. The same could be said of other enslaved women in Luke and Acts: the one who identifies Peter as a follower of Jesus (Luke 22:54-62) and Rhoda, who announces Peter's deliverance from prison (Acts 12:12-17).

The missionaries' encounter with the prophetic woman leads directly to another conflict. Having lost a source of revenue, the woman's enslavers stir up trouble for Paul and Silas, and the local magistrates flog them and toss them in jail. The jailer fastens their feet in the stocks, a treatment that adds significant pain to the beating they have already received.

Fannie Lou Hamer drew upon this story during her own experience of torture and imprisonment in 1963. In a Montgomery County, Mississippi, jail, the civil rights activist and several colleagues were severely beaten. Hamer would experience the effects all her life. But in the middle of the night she broke out in song: "Paul and Silas was bound in jail. / Let my people go." In their pain, Paul and Silas pray and sing aloud, gaining an audience from the other prisoners. God sends an earthquake that looses them and their fellow prisoners from their chains, much as Peter was previously set free (Acts 12:6-11).

The preachers show compassion for the jailer who has just placed them in chains. Having drawn his sword to take his own life, he hears Paul cry out to him, begs the men to bring him to salvation, welcomes them into his home, and undergoes baptism with his entire household. His story ends with joy.

Acts features two more household conversions, that of Cornelius (10:1-48) and Crispus (18:7-8). An ancient household contained many kinds of relationships, including those with intimate employees and the enslaved. We may wonder how freely the household members embraced the gospel. Willie James Jennings judges that Lydia "makes her home a site of the new intimacy of the Spirit," and I want to apply his optimism to the jailer.

I am troubled that the story does not extend grace to the enslaved woman, while grace abounds toward the jailer. The enslaved prophet even tries to reach out to the

preachers. Like her, they bear a message from one who enslaves them (Acts 16:17)! I want to imagine that her deliverance brings her story into a space of freedom, but the text doesn't say that. I am glad the jailer and his household receive mercy. I just want the story to show more concern for the enslaved prophet who speaks the truth—even if the origin of her message is demonic—only to be silenced.

Biblical stories often refuse to provide all the information we readers desire. But that void of information opens a space in which we can read our lives into the story. The picture may not be pretty. In our Gospel reading, Jesus prays for true unity and an abundance of love among those who follow him. Yet how quickly we turn away from people whose truth proves inconvenient for us. Their poverty reminds us of the inequities that allow us to prosper. Their disability awakens us to the reality of our own vulnerability. And how gracious we are to those who do and say the most terrible things, yet who somehow make us feel comfortable. Grace is for everyone. Disparities in grace, however, reveal deep truths about ourselves and our society.