

- c. The Spirit used the men's ministry at the river as the occasion for liberating the slave-girl; so He would use that latter interaction to bring about the liberation of the Philippian jailer and his household (16:19-40). What must have seemed at the time to be an unfortunate, life-threatening situation would prove to be the triumph of divine power. In a marvelous irony, God's power was going to grant physical deliverance to two men who were already free in Christ, but in order to bring that true freedom to others who, though physically unshackled, were bound by sin and death. As it had with Lydia before them, salvation was coming to the jailer and his house; and in concert with the slave-girl, they were soon to be delivered from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of light.

God had a goal in sight and His purpose would stand, but He set His plan in motion through the greedy indignation of the girl's owners (Proverbs 16:33). When they discovered that her divining powers were gone, they realized they had lost a valuable asset. Infuriated, they set out to find this man who had effectively stolen their property and see to it that he paid dearly for his thievery. Evidently only Silas was with Paul at the time they found him, for Luke records that the two of them alone were seized and dragged before the authorities in the market place. There the girl's masters leveled their charges, *none of which had any connection to the "crime" Paul had committed against them* (16:20-21). This clearly reflected disingenuousness on their part, but it probably also resulted from their confusion and ignorance regarding what had actually taken place.

- First of all, the girl's masters wanted retribution and so were determined to bring charges that would "stick" and be acted upon. And because this was to take place in the public venue of the *agora* (the center of public life in Greco-Roman cities), they knew that the best way to accomplish their goal was to level accusations that would incite the public's indignation. If they could accomplish that – and they did (16:22), the authorities would be forced to act or face the greater problem of an angry mob.
- At the same time, the accusers were likely confused about what exactly had happened to their slave. Short of recognizing that she had been demon-possessed, they'd have sought to find a different explanation for the loss of her powers. Nor would the girl's – or Paul's – explanation have satisfied them; in view of their loss, nonsensical ravings about a crucified Jew only added insult to injury. Whatever they reasoned had happened to her, what they knew for certain was that Paul had stripped them of a lucrative asset and rendered their slave useless to them. Worse yet, she had become a liability – someone whose support would cost them money.

The masters' charges do suggest that the girl and/or Paul had tried to explain the loss of her powers. But however they might have understood that explanation, they expressed Paul's offense in terms of promoting Jewish customs that were foreign to Romans and unlawful for them to practice. In this way he and his Jewish companions were inciting confusion and discord in the city.

- 1) The accusers' words had their intended effect upon the crowd and soon the magistrates were facing a potentially explosive situation. How a large crowd got caught up in the proceedings isn't clear, but it's quite possible that the word spreading among them was that these two Jews were guilty of sedition. Conforming to Roman religious practice indicated loyalty to Rome, and the crowd may have believed that Paul and Silas were denouncing or attempting to undermine those customs. By law, Roman citizens could embrace only those religious beliefs and practices sanctioned by Rome itself. Philippi was a Roman colonial city, and the fact that there was a minimal Jewish presence there would have only added to the confusion and outrage. The girl's masters had structured their charges well: If their appeal to Roman law failed, their appeal to the crowd's latent anti-Semitism and national pride would not (ref. vv. 20-21).
- 2) Facing a possible riot, the magistrates had Paul and Silas stripped and beaten with rods in the public square in the presence of the assembly. Paul would later take note of three such beatings, this perhaps being the first. In any case, it was the first instance of purely Gentile opposition to the gospel. This public flogging was calculated to appease the crowd, but to insure against further trouble the authorities had Paul and Silas locked down in the prison dungeon with their feet fastened in stocks (16:23-24).
- 3) Accosted, falsely accused, horribly beaten and unjustly and torturously imprisoned, Paul and Silas had every *human* reason to conclude that their Lord had abandoned them, if not turned against them. They had done nothing in Philippi except honor and serve the gospel as He directed them. Even more, it was God's own power that had freed the slave-girl from the divining spirit; why was He now causing them to suffer for what He had done? Was this the way God rewards His faithful servants?

Had Paul and Silas contemplated with a "natural mind" the events of their time in Philippi and their present circumstance, they'd have surely been disheartened, angry and resentful, if not brought to the point of utter despair. This is what would be expected from them; instead, Luke recorded that the two men were filled with joy and praise (16:25). He gave no explanation for this because none is needed: Paul and Silas were viewing their circumstance by faith rather than by sight.

They could see beyond the what, why, how and when to rest and rejoice in the *who* (2 Timothy 1:7-12). There's no indication that they knew what God was doing or what was to come; what their faith assured them was that He was with them and was directing their circumstances for the advancement and fruitfulness of the gospel. The same purposefulness that had brought them to Philippi, to the river and to the slave-girl had led them into bonds. They had seen those previous providences bear fruit for Christ and had no doubt of the same outcome in the present one.

- 4) Paul and Silas didn't know what God had in mind, but He did. Around midnight, while they were praying and singing praises, the ground under the prison began to shake violently and all the doors were opened. But what initially only frightened the prisoners left them totally dumbfounded: The earthquake could explain doors opening and bonds coming loose, but Luke was careful to state that every door opened and every chain was unfastened (16:26). This was remarkable, and the prisoners' minds would have immediately turned to the God of Paul and Silas to whom praises and petitions were being offered at the moment the earthquake occurred.
- 5) Whatever their thoughts about what was happening, apparently the situation left the prisoners frozen with fear and amazement. In the meantime, the earthquake had roused the jailer who rushed to check on his charges. Seeing the prison doors swung open and believing that all his prisoners had fled, he drew his sword in order to take his own life. Roman law held a guard fully accountable for those under his watch; it prescribed life for life and the jailer preferred to take his own rather than allow it to be taken by his superiors. But Paul saw what he was about to do and cried out to him that all his prisoners were still in place (16:27-28).
- 6) After seeing for himself the truth of Paul's claim, the jailer found himself completely overcome. Trembling with shock and relief, he fell on the ground before Paul and Silas. Luke says nothing about what happened over the next several minutes, but the jailer's eventual question indicates that the two men used that opportunity to explain to him that this episode was the work of the living God; the God on whose behalf they were in Philippi and whose service had led to their beating and incarceration.

Whatever they told the jailer, the Spirit's power was at work in him as it had been in Lydia and the slave-girl. This man was tough, callous, and brutal, for only such an individual was suited to oversee a Roman prison. The jailer was able to intimidate and control the most hardened criminal, but he was no match for the Spirit; the One who had shaken the foundation of the prison shook this man to the core of his being. Utterly undone, he pleaded with Paul and Silas to show him how to be saved (16:30).
- 7) Luke recounted their response as succinct and straightforward: The deliverance the jailer sought was to be obtained through faith in the Lord Jesus. Clearly Paul and Silas said more than this, as Luke himself indicated (16:32). Indeed, without careful definition and explanation there's no way this pagan Roman or his household would have any idea what the two men were talking about. Luke recorded these particular words because they capture the essential gospel truth that Paul and Silas communicated to the jailer: For all people in every place and time, salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone; God's good news to the world of men is that whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

- 8) Faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word of Christ, and so it was with the jailer and his household. Repeating the work He had done in Cornelius' house and then Lydia's, the Spirit moved upon those present to open their minds and join them to the Savior. Only a short time ago Paul and Silas had sat in the filth of a stinking dungeon, covered with their own blood and bound with shackles under armed guard. Now, in an unimaginable turn of events, they sat at the table of the man who hours earlier had reveled in their suffering. This callous man who had taken no thought of their suffering now tenderly washed and bandaged their wounds; he who had tortured them in stocks was setting food before them, rejoicing with them in the Lord they now shared in common (16:33-34).

Christ's Spirit had directed His witnesses to Philippi in order to testify to His gospel and demonstrate His liberating power. He had done so in three distinct situations, each one emphasizing a different obstacle to the gospel's triumph. In Lydia's case the obstacle was the self-righteousness that enslaves and blinds the minds of the devout. Like the Pharisee who preached the gospel to her that day by the river, she had been a pious worshipper of God, but in accordance with a natural mind. Like him, her piety had been blasphemous; she, too, needed her heart opened so that the light of God's glory in the face of Christ could rise in it.

In contrast to Lydia, the slave-girl's bondage was overt and demonic. In her case the Spirit had to overcome the spiritual powers of darkness and not merely a darkened human mind. The jailer, in turn, was neither self-righteous nor possessed, but he was equally enslaved. Hardened and brutal, he had no interest in religion but served the god of self-interest. No other sort of man could rise to his position and authority, and the jailer doubtless used those resources to his own advantage and profit. His life reflected the ethic of Rome itself – a terrifying, invincible and dominating force that recognized and respected power and celebrated those who exploited it to their own ends. This man's worldview couldn't have been farther removed from the ethic of the kingdom of heaven; he was in need of supernatural deliverance as much as the girl bound by a demon.

Philippi marked the beginning of the Spirit's mission to the nations and He had triumphed in a mighty way over every obstacle raised up against Christ and His gospel. Now it was time for His witnesses to move on, but there remained one more victory to be won: In order to go forward Paul and Silas needed to be released from the Philippian jail. Here the Spirit's liberating power was exercised, not in salvation, but in vindication.

Paul and Silas were effectively already free from prison and the Spirit could have led the jailer to simply send them away quietly. But that would be disastrous for him and destroy the testimony of Paul and his companions. No, the magistrates needed to release Paul and Silas, and in such a way that they would be vindicated as innocent men, their physical triumph punctuating the spiritual triumph of the gospel in that place. With flawless precision the Spirit had accomplished His work in Philippi; the ingathering of the nations was underway and the Gentile world would never be the same (2 Corinthians 2:14ff).