

“What Must I Do to be Saved?
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 Texts: Acts 16:11-40

Our reading details Paul’s arrival at Philippi and records Lydia, his first Asian convert in that foremost/chief city in that region of Macedonia. Seems ironic that Paul, having been forbidden to evangelize Asia should have an Asian woman for his first convert. She was a Thyatirian—beyond Smyrna (50 m NE) and Pergamum (30 m SE). So one reaches Thyatira through Lydia—a thriving commercial center notable for woolens, linens bronze (notably weaponry), dyeing, tanning and pottery. The current name for this Turkish city is Akhisar (pop. 177,000; census: 2012). Lydia and her household came to faith and were baptized (v. 15) and her home became the home base for the church in Philippi. Lydia was a salesperson for the commodity of purple cloth made in Thyatira and her trade was lucrative.

Now as Paul met with Jewish believers on the Sabbath beside a river, or more particularly, as he journeyed to and fro from Lydia’s house Paul and Silas were shadowed by a young woman, a damsel, who was demon-possessed and who practiced soothsaying—another lucrative trade for her handlers. She was a slave and Satan used her to harass, to draw unwanted attention to the work of the evangelistic apostle. She broadcast daily, **These men are servants of the most high God, which show us the way of salvation.** It is not that this was untrue; rather it was a nuisance! Paul found it aggravating, especially when it went on for many days. The girl was attracted to Paul, or to the power of Christ in him more pointedly so part of her pursued him for that—we might describe that as a healthy desire but health was not what Satan had in mind for her. Rather he was using her negatively, even as the Lord was moving amongst those Paul was praying with and to whom Paul was witnessing. *In the idolatrous, superstitious pagan culture, which was the dominant culture in Philippi at that time, soothsaying, channeling and summoning of spirits was commonplace. The setting was pre-Christian.*

I suppose that I picked up on this demonic possession because of my recent work in the demonic pre-history of New England, and the native American Kennebec region (which would later become the state of Maine). Witchcraft was commonplace, Indian healers, shaman and so-called “witchdoctors” were *health practitioners* back in that day. Disease was associated with curses, omens and spells—evidence that dark magic was being deployed against you. False religions, idolatry, animism were all in evidence leading some like Cotton Matthews to suggest that Indians were: “Satan’s most devoted children.” Not to ignore linguistic, ideational and cultural disparities—which were certainly part of the mix—and to avoid mindless, stooping to stereotypes, I want to highlight the universality of the demonic enterprise and spiritual warfare. Somethings are consistent through the centuries—same players with different names/titles and ceremonial dress! And there remains but one remedy: the spreading of the gospel light, shattering the darkness with the good news of Jesus Christ who is the Savior of all who would be saved!

So what was transpiring in Philippi was still happening in colonial New England and, frankly, is still occurring in our time and historical setting. That makes Paul's deliverance of the slave girl more than merely a personal intervention. It was a blow at Satan's stronghold and the reaction was swift, violent and indirect.

Her handlers immediately seized upon Paul and Silas and dragged them into the town square—the market place—where the rulers of Philippi could be found. These local magistrates heard the charge **These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city.** Oh, so anti-Semitism was current then, too! Colonial New England was relatively Jew-less—so cultural anti-semitism would be missing; even where it existed theologically. **They teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans.** We should note that Romans opposed religious novelty (local religions could be sustained (but only if Roman gods/goddesses were also honored) throughout the first century BC—the Philippians may have been somewhat behind the curve on this issue. They knew enough to know that if Paul and Silas were Roman citizens (which they were) they had broken the law by beating them untried. Paul humbled the crowds and magistrates by demanding that they who threw them into prison must come and release them publicly—admitting their lawlessness.

When they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into prison, charging the jailer to keep them securely. (vv. 23-24)

So a deliverance ministry morphed into a public spectacle. But there was more to it. Paul and Silas reacted to their harsh treatment by singing praises to God in the prison block. **And suddenly there was a great earthquake so that the foundation of the prison were shaken: and all the doors were opened, and every one's bonds were loosed. And the keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open. He drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing all the prisoners had fled.** For which escape he would certainly have been executed under normal circumstances. But this was the hand of God vindicating and rescuing Paul and Silas. The slave girl was loosed from her bondage and now an enormously miraculous deliverance followed: the earthquake and its fall-out! The power structure of that pagan city had come under divine judgment and they knew enough to recognize that they had been chastened. *The captives had taken their captor prisoner!* **Do yourself no harm, we are all here.** (v. 28)

The jailor recognized divine power *and authority* when he saw it. **Sirs, what must I do to be saved?** Now that is always the question, isn't it!!?

And they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. And they spoke unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. He took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes, and was baptized, he and all his, straightway. And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and, rejoicing, believing in God with all his house."

Look at the numbers, the terms of this exchange: one liberated slave girl results in the reform of the legal system and a whole household of the law enforcers (how many? many) are converted to Christ and truly saved. That is hardly tit-for-tat, hardly even . . . an abundant return. That's how it works!

Amen.