

# #FREEDOM!

Hespeler, 29 May 2022 © Scott McAndless

[Acts 16:16-34](#), Psalm 97, Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21, John 17:20-26

If there is one word that, above all others, people are disagreeing over and fighting over in our days, that word has got to be freedom. We are just hearing a whole lot about freedom. It was the cry on the lips of the people who forced their way into the United States capital on January 6<sup>th</sup> over a year ago. It was the resounding cry of trucker convoy protesters who occupied the heart of Ottawa earlier this year. It continues to be heard all over the place in protests against pandemic mandates that are mostly no longer in place.

And how many candidates in the ongoing Ontario election have been dogged by protesters shouting about this very thing? Meanwhile, the people of Ukraine are fighting for their freedom while the Russian president proclaims that he ordered the invasion of Ukraine in order to bring those people freedom.

## No one is Anti-Freedom

The word has never had more currency, it seems. But, of course, while we are doing all this fighting over freedom, there is nobody who will stand up and claim to be on the opposing side. No one is going to claim the title of being anti-freedom and indeed almost everyone claims to be fighting for it. So, it actually turns out that what we are fighting over is not freedom itself but actually the *definition* of freedom. That was why I was so interested when I first looked at our reading this morning from the Book of Acts. The word freedom doesn't actually appear in the story – not even once – and yet this story is all about the meaning and practice of liberty.

## An Enslaved Woman

The story opens with a woman who is the absolute opposite of free. She is identified as a female slave which means she has no freedom in this world. She is also possessed by a “spirit of divination,” which was understood to mean that she would lose control of her mind in ways that forced her to foretell the future.

Of course, we might be inclined to diagnose her, if we encountered her today, as having some sort of mental health issue while they spoke of her condition in purely spiritual terms but, however you understand it, she pretty clearly does not have conscious control over what she says and does. That is a particularly devastating kind of slavery.

## The Enslaved Men

The next people we meet in the story – the actual main characters – are also not free. It is the female slave herself who points this out when she cries out for anyone to hear, “**These men are slaves of the Most High God, who**



**proclaim to you a way of salvation.”** And I don’t think that it is an accident that these two men are described using the very same term that is used for the female slave. They also need to be understood as being not free. But, pretty clearly, their slavery seems to be a little different from hers.

These two slaves of the Most High God, Paul and Silas, do have an objection to what this female slave says about them. Paul becomes annoyed with her. This is not because what she is saying is untrue, but simply because he doesn’t like all of the attention that that is putting on him. And so, he sets her free from this condition that has enslaved her mind and spirit.

## The Only Free People

It is at this point that we meet the only literally free people in the story. They are the people who own the female slave. And I would draw your attention to the fact that it is these people, the only free people, who are the ones who complain about the loss of their freedom. They are upset with Paul because they believe that he has infringed upon their freedom of commerce. They made lots of money by means of the oracles of this female slave, and their complaint is that Paul has now deprived them of their freedom to profit.

## Two Imprisoned Slaves

As a result of this, Paul and Silas, these slaves of the Most High God, are deprived of their freedom. They are thrown into prison and their legs are locked into the stocks. And then what happens? God intervenes in the story to set Paul and Silas free. So, do you see what I mean when I say that this story is all about the meaning of freedom. And, as I look at this story, I really do think that it could help us a lot as we try and sort out the really big arguments we are having about freedom these days.

Of course, the freedom that is at stake in most of this story is not really something that we have direct experience of. We are very fortunate, of course, that none of us has experienced firsthand the scourge of slavery, either as slaves or as owners. Perhaps more of us have some experience with mental health issues, either our own or those of the people we care about, but I know of few who have had to deal with issues that resulted in the loss of the freedom of their minds. And, of course, most of us are fortunate not to have had any experience of either just or unjust incarceration.

## Think of the Poor Owners!

So, what is the closest point of contact to the question of freedom that we have in this story? Well, I would say that the kind of freedom we hear most talked about these days is the freedom of the owners that gets disrupted. So let’s just focus in on that for a few minutes.

Indeed, let us just try to have a little bit of sympathy for these poor owners. First of all, let us note, that “owners” is plural. This female slave doesn’t just belong to one master. And it is not just some mom and pop operation that purchased her either. No, she belongs to a corporation. A bunch of people formed a corporation in order to buy up slaves who had special skills like this young woman. They invested their money with the expectation that they would be able to exploit

their property without limit. They've got stockholders to think about. Can't somebody think about the poor stockholders?

## What of the Freedom to Exploit?

So, it is these corporate owners who scream loudest about their freedom and who manage to get powerful people to act on their behalf. It seems to me that this is something that still happens. When it comes to the freedom of corporations to exploit their workers, to manipulate their markets or to protect their profits, such freedom seems to be near absolute still today.

But it goes much further than that because, not only are the owners a corporation, they are also part of a privileged class in that society. And people who are particularly privileged for any reason, often simply cannot see how their exercise of privilege might impinge upon the freedom of others. These owners simply cannot see how much damage they are doing as they profit off of the exploitation of a young woman who is deep, deep in bondage.

## The Freedom of Paul and Silas

So, that is one ideal of freedom that we see in this passage and, I don't know about you, but I don't find it particularly inspiring. But there is another idea of freedom in the story. Paul and Silas do not have freedom as the world defines it. They are the slaves of the Most High God and then they are thrown in prison and clapped in stocks.

And yet then, when they are at their most unfree, they do not act like it, do they? They start singing hymns of praise to their master even in their confinement. And then the story takes a strange twist when their master, the Most High God, intervenes to grant them their freedom. There is an earthquake, and they suddenly are freed from their bonds while the doors of their prison are flung wide open.

## What they do with their Freedom

But here is the really fascinating part of the story. They react to this new freedom of theirs in almost the exact opposite way of the slave owners. You see, they realize something that the masters clearly do not. They recognize that their exercise of freedom will negatively affect the freedom and safety of others. You see, it was common practice for guards who permitted a prisoner to escape to be severely punished and even put to death for their failure.

Yes, the guard who was over that prison was just as unfree as Paul and Silas were in many ways. When he sees the aftermath of the earthquake and concludes, without even needing to bother and check, that the prisoners must have all escaped, the guard is ready to fall upon his own sword to escape such punishment and dishonour. But Paul, though he has been granted freedom by God, has actually not chosen to use that freedom in a way that will impact the life of the guard. He and Silas, and indeed all of the prisoners, have not escaped and so Paul shouts out to the guard, **"Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."**

## The Reaction to Such Freedom

Do you realize that what Paul and Silas do in the story is precisely the thing that gets people labeled as sheep (which is a short form for accusing people of not being free) these days? People go

around loudly proclaiming that, because they are free, they do not have to do things for the sake of the safety and well-being of others. They mock and criticize people who make the choice to curtail their own freedoms for the sake of vulnerable people or for the larger community. That is indeed a version of freedom, but I find it to be a lot more like the freedom of the slave owners than the freedom experienced by Paul and Silas.

## A Desire to Experience More Freedom

Paul and Silas have been set free by God, but they make a choice to express that freedom by prioritizing something else. They choose instead to value the salvation of the guard. And I mean by that that they literally save him from death at his own hands or the hands of his masters. But then the guard, having been given a taste of true salvation is not satisfied. He needs more. **“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”** he cries out.

He immediately assumes that these people, who have chosen to value his salvation above their own freedom, can also save him in ways that go deeper and further. He is, of course, correct in this assumption. They answer him, **“Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”** They tell him that he will find, in this Jesus, salvation so powerful that it extends even to his entire household.

## Lessons on Freedom

So, then, what does this story teach us about freedom in this moment when it is such a volatile concept? It certainly shows us that freedom is an incredibly valuable thing. We certainly ought to prize the freedoms that we have. We should not let them be eroded away and should do our very best to make sure that more people should have such precious freedom.

But I also think that this story is telling us that freedom is not an end in itself. Freedom that is used to exploit the minds and the bodies of others in the pursuit of our own goals is not an inspiring form of freedom and is not one that we should aspire to.

## Freedom we Choose not to Use

The freedom that is truly valuable is the freedom that we sometimes choose not to exercise because we care about others. And when we do that, when we choose to lay down our freedom because it may save somebody else, the promise seems to be that such salvation, so dearly bought, is so powerful that it may just spread far beyond our one little act of care and compassion for others. And that is how the good news and the message of hope will spread in this world.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Galatia, I cannot help but wonder if he was thinking of incidents like this one when he penned this: **“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become enslaved to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’”** (Galatians 5:13 -14)

Paul was clearly someone who understood a few things about freedom that still seem to elude us today. But I’m hoping that maybe we might be able to learn something from him.